

# The Power of Ritual in Prehistory

Secret Societies and Origins of  
Social Complexity

Brian Hayden



## THE POWER OF RITUAL IN PREHISTORY

### SECRET SOCIETIES AND ORIGINS OF SOCIAL COMPLEXITY

*The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* is the first book in nearly a century to deal with traditional secret societies from a comparative perspective and the first from an archaeological viewpoint. Providing a clear definition, as well as the material signatures, of ethnographic secret societies, Brian Hayden demonstrates how they worked, what motivated their organizers, and what tactics they used to obtain what they wanted. He shows that far from working for the welfare of their communities, traditional secret societies emerged as predatory organizations operated for the benefit of their own members. Moreover, and contrary to the prevailing ideas that prehistoric rituals were used to integrate communities, Hayden demonstrates how traditional secret societies created divisiveness and inequalities. They were one of the key tools for increasing political control leading to chiefdoms, states, and world religions. Hayden's conclusions will be eye-opening, not only for archaeologists, but also for anthropologists, political scientists, and scholars of religion.

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“So well were the secrets of the religion kept that the esoteric knowledge of its dogma and ritual have only come to light after acculturation processes have left so few who practice it that these elderly people prefer to leave some record of it rather than letting it be completely lost ... These people ... deluded early anthropologists into an assumption that they had a simpler religious system than existed elsewhere.” (Bean and Vane 1978:669 – regarding California)

In Vanuatu, “The difficulties facing the traveller who wishes to investigate the religious notions of primitive peoples are well known ... there is the mistrust the natives justifiably feel towards the whites and which has made them close-mouthed ... men of high *suque* rank ... are particularly uncommunicative ... because they realize, quite correctly, that the subversion of their position is chiefly due to European influence; for this reason the old men vouchsafe no information and the young men know little ... because the ultimate secrets of the cult are disclosed to them only on reaching the highest ranks of the *suque* and it is given to very few to attain these.” (Speiser 1923/1996:307)

Along the Mississippi, “they are so close-mouthed as to all the mysteries of their religion that the missionary [Father Gavion] could not discover anything about it.” (Shea 1861:134)

“The initiation rites of the Keresan societies were kept secret and no shamans ever spoke to anthropologists on the subject.” (Levy 1994:312)

Fortune (1932:59fn,60) makes frequent reference to the difficulties he experienced in obtaining information about secret societies among the Omaha, with informants denying any knowledge of supernatural affairs or often fearing for their lives or expecting to die as a consequence of revealing secrets.



The Poro ritual “can never be described in full because those who saw it were bound by an inviolable oath never to reveal its secrets on pain of death” (Harley 1941a:123). The internal workings and doctrines of the Poro are a mystery (Harley 1941b:31). “The inner circles have scarcely been penetrated.” (Harley 1941b:32)

“It is difficult to discover more than the merest fragments of the secrets of Egbo, as any known informant would meet with a speedy death.” (Talbot 1912:40)

Among the Chumash, “the astronomers’ knowledge of the stars was certainly not shared by the common man.” (Hudson and Underhay 1978:100)

“Some such statement as this of the difficulties in the way of a certain knowledge of the subject is given here of the religion of the Melanesians.” (Codrington 1891:118)

“In general, the knowledge of astronomy ... was of an esoteric variety in the hands of the head of the secret society.” (Loeb 1926:229 – regarding the Kuksu in California)

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 THE SECRET	I
PART I THE NEW WORLD	
2 THE COMPLEX HUNTER/GATHERERS OF THE AMERICAN NORTHWEST	31
3 CALIFORNIA	76
4 THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST AND MESOAMERICA	121
5 PLAINS SECRET SOCIETIES	144
6 THE EASTERN WOODLANDS AND OTHERS	178
PART II THE OLD WORLD	
7 OCEANIA	193
8 CHIEFDOMS IN CENTRAL AFRICA	239
9 WEST AFRICA	246
PART III IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHAEOLOGY	
10 ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS	285
11 CONCLUSIONS	336
<i>References</i>	373
<i>Index</i>	397

## FIGURES

2.1	Map of ethnic groups on the Pacific Northwest Coast	page 32
2.2	Wolf Society dancers on the Northwest Coast	34
2.3	A new <i>Hamatsa</i> Society initiate on the Northwest Coast	37
2.4	<i>Hamatsa</i> Society guards who monitor proper behavior	40
2.5	A bear head used in Northwest Coast ceremonies	42
2.6	A diorama of an initiate possessed by a cannibal spirit	48
2.7	Wooden whistles used in secret societies on the Northwest Coast	60
2.8	<i>Hamatsa</i> Society members waiting for a feast to begin	62
2.9	Animal images in the Cave of Animals, Northwest Coast	66
3.1	Map of Californian ethnic groups	77
3.2	An earth-covered ritual structure in California	79
3.3	Bone flutes used in Californian secret societies	86
3.4	Floor plan of a Pomo ritual structure	86
3.5	Floor plan of a Patwin ritual structure	87
3.6	The inside of a Pomo ritual structure	88
3.7	Drawing by Henry Brown of the inside of a Konkow ritual structure	89
4.1	Map of the principal ethnic groups of Central and Southwestern North America	122
4.2	The ceremonial altar of the Pueblo Sian Knife secret society	135
4.3	A public performance by the Hopi Snake Society and the Antelope Society	136
5.1	An Arikara ritual structure and secret society members	150
5.2	Diagram of the participants and objects in a Hidatsa Painted Red Stick ceremony	162
5.3	Diagram of a subsequent phase of the Hidatsa Painted Red Stick ceremony	170
6.1	Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret society members “shooting” energy into an initiate	179
6.2	Sacred objects used in Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret societies	179
6.3	Pictographs on bark scrolls of Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret society rituals	181
6.4	An elevated view of an Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret society ritual structure	183

6.5	An interior view of an Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret society ritual structure	183
6.6	Wooden figurines used in Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret societies	185
6.7	Drawings of spirit connections to, or emanations from, tents of Ojibway <i>Midewiwin</i> secret society members	186
7.1	Map of the New Hebrides	198
7.2	Village layouts in the New Hebrides	206
7.3	A men's clubhouse on Ambrym Island	207
7.4	A men's clubhouse on Venua Leva Island	207
7.5	A men's clubhouse on Ambrym Island	208
7.6	Interior of a clubhouse on Malekula Island with plastered skulls	208
7.7	Plastered skulls of former secret society officials, Malekula Island	209
7.8	Houses for ancestral spirits on Malekula Island	209
7.9	A clubhouse with stone walls on Gaua Island	226
7.10	The inside of a clubhouse on Venua Lava Island	226
7.11	Interiors of two clubhouses on Espiritu Santo Island	227
7.12	Dolmen-like stone tables in a secret society dancing ground on Epi Island	228
7.13	Stone platforms for sacrificing pigs at ceremonies on Ambrym Island and Aoba Island	228
7.14	Yalo cave and pictographs on Melakula Island	230
7.15	A menhir-like standing stone marking a grave on Maevo Island	232
8.1	Map of ethnic groups of Africa mentioned in the text	240
9.1	Entrance of a <i>Poro</i> ritual structure in the bush in Sierra Leone	254
9.2	An <i>Igbo</i> ritual house, Nigeria	254
9.3	Three examples of "Leopard stones" in Liberia	255
9.4	An ornamented spoon used in <i>Poro</i> rituals by the Kra tribe in Liberia	270
9.5	A village plan in Nigeria showing the location of a ritual structure	273
9.6	A secret society ritual structure in Nigeria	274
9.7	A secret society stone pillar representing a human form in Nigeria	275
9.8	The interior of a Nigerian secret society house	276
9.9	A plan of the interior of a Nigerian ritual house	277
9.10	A photograph of the interior of a secret society ritual house in Nigeria	278
10.1	An Elk secret society dancer from the American Plains and the Upper Paleolithic "Sorcerer" image from Les Trois Frères Cave, France	296
10.2	The scribbled engravings from the Abside panel in Lascaux Cave	300
10.3	Graffiti on a modern elevator door	301
10.4	Power animals carved on pillars at Göbekli Tepe	310
10.5	A major pillar at Göbekli Tepe in the form of a human	311



10.6	Two stone masks from the Near Eastern Prepottery Neolithic	312
10.7	The main plaza at Chavín de Huántar, probably used for public performances	329
10.8	The elaborate and secluded Lanzón sculpture at Chavín de Huántar	330
10.9	A bas-relief sculpture showing a transformed man-animal at Chavín de Huántar	331

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As will hopefully become evident, my journey into the world of secret societies has been a long but fascinating one. The scenes conjured up by early ethnographers never fail to amaze and sometimes even perturb many readers, including myself. They are some of the most extraordinary accounts in the ethnographic record. So it seems odd that archaeologists have overlooked them for so long in most places. The goal of this book is to place secret societies at the forefront of archaeological consciousness and to have them occupy their rightful place in prehistorians' accounts of how and why many important sociopolitical and religious changes took place in the past. However, the prominence of ritual and religion in the emergence of socioeconomic and political complexity has always been something of an odd feature. The vast amounts of time and effort supposedly devoted to the spirits at Chavin, Teotihuacan, Stonehenge, Avebury, Ur, Karnak, and countless other major centers all seem strange if their only basis was belief in the supernatural. The argument in this volume is that secret societies provide the missing link to explaining how and why these developments took place. I hope that readers will find this less-taken-path as fascinating as I have.

Reading the early ethnographies for this book has deepened my appreciation for the very significant contributions that so many pioneering ethnographers made during the last part of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. It is apparent that they realized the importance of recording as much detail as possible about traditional ways of life that were rapidly disappearing, and they seem to have spared no effort to record those vanishing cultural traditions. We are incredibly lucky that they were active in recording information on secret societies when they were, for, as Bailey (1995:18) realized, there was a narrow window of time when this was possible. In his example, if Francis La Flesche had tried to record Osage ritual information ten years before 1910, no priest would have discussed religion with him. Ten years later, and any knowledgeable priests would have all been dead. This same situation characterizes many other areas where ritual information was obtained. We all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to these early ethnographers, as well as the priests who realized that their traditions were dying and wanted to have them recorded for their descendants. They were

true visionaries. We also owe a great debt to the institutions and their leaders that sponsored and published so much of this remarkable work. J. W. Powell, Director of the Bureau of American Ethnology in the Smithsonian Institution, was a particularly key figure, but there were many others on all continents and in many other institutions. I am profoundly grateful for all these early records.

In more contemporary terms, I would especially like to thank D'Ann Owens-Baird for introducing me to the secret society world. Without her insights, this line of inquiry might never have happened. I would also like to thank Suzanne Villeneuve for contributing to the collection of data as well as to the debates about the archaeological interpretations of ritual remains at the Keatley Creek site. John Ware and David Dye were of great assistance in sharing their insights, data, and enthusiasm for secret societies. Shirley Johansen (2004) helped explore some initial parameters as part of an MA thesis. Last but not least, this publication, as well as other investigations into secret societies, was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this volume are those of myself and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE SECRET

This book is about secret societies: their dynamics, their *raisons d'être*, their characteristics according to ethnographic accounts, and their importance for understanding changes in the archaeological record. Secret societies embodied some of the most awe-inspiring events in the cultural repertoires of traditional societies. They brought to earth masked spirits who performed supernatural feats and exerted exceptional influences on the living. Those in high positions claimed to hold the secrets of the universe and of life, to be able to control spirits, confer wealth, bring the dead back to life, exorcise the possessed, and perform supernatural feats. Secret societies often built elaborate special structures. These organizations may have been precursors of both stage magic shows and institutionalized religions, and they may have played critical roles in the foundation of complex political organizations.

By firelight, terrifying spirits could appear together with cannibals and supernatural destroyers. Primordial forces, unlike anything seen in normal life, were invoked, unleashed, and reined in again. Secret societies had mystery, pomp, impressive displays, and above all, claims to secret supernatural power. Adepts ate burning coals or spewed them out of their mouths as fountains of fire. The initiated appeared out of smoke or fell from the skies; they menaced the uninitiated who were forced to hide or flee. Behind the staged dramas, there were often real and macabre displays of ruthless power including human sacrifices. Trespassers on to the grounds of secret societies were killed or, if they were lucky, got off with a beating.



Reading the early ethnographic descriptions is not always for the faint of heart. The accounts may captivate readers owing to their incredible descriptions, but the images evoked can perturb sensitive dispositions and invade dreams. Secret society members did not shirk from using any tactics they could to impress and intimidate their fellow villagers, no matter how gruesome. Memberships in the most important societies came at high costs not only in terms of material property, but in physical and emotional terms as well. In addition to harrowing physical ordeals, total commitment to the societies was demanded. To prove such commitment, candidates in some societies had to make their wives available for sex with leaders of the society or even give their wives away, or they had to provide human sacrifices, engage in cannibalism, or even eat their own sons. To enter into the world of secret societies is to enter a world of mystery, magic, mortification, smoke and mirrors imbued with supernatural and real power. At times, comparisons with the “dark side” of the Force in *Star Wars* might not be too farfetched.

Perhaps because of these features, secret societies have fascinated amateur and professional researchers of politics and religion for well over a century, and the accounts are still captivating. As early as the 1840s, Paul Kane (1996:146,151) recorded a *Hamatsa* ceremony and used the term “secret society” to refer to exclusive ritual organizations on America’s Northwest Coast with costly initiations. Considerable anthropological attention was subsequently devoted to secret societies from 1890 to 1940, although much less interest has been displayed by academicians since then. Members were usually sworn to keep the secrets of their society’s power on pain of death. Secret societies occurred in tribal and chiefly societies and, in some cases, persisted into modern industrial societies. Anthropological luminaries such as Franz Boas and Philip Drucker have written extensively on secret societies, while innumerable books have been written about contemporary secret societies such as the Freemasons.

There are occasional excavation reports that have identified “dance houses” or “suditories” in California, and there have been many excavations of kivas in the Southwest. However, even in these areas, treatments generally stop at the description and identification of ritual structures (with notable exceptions by Gamble 2008, Weeks 2009, 2012, Ware 2014, and Dye 2016). In most other areas, secret societies have been ignored altogether (again with some notable exceptions by Whitehouse 1992, Mills 2014, and Dietrich and Notroff 2015). Whitehouse, in particular, was a pioneer in promoting the existence of secret societies in prehistoric cultures, especially Neolithic caves.

In archaeology, it has become fashionable to invoke the vague power of ritual and beliefs in attempts to explain cultural changes of the past, especially where impressive ritual structures appeared (Pauketat and Emerson 1997; Cauvin 2000; Whalen and Minnis 2001; Emerson et al. 2003:308; Parker Pearson et al.

2006:234–5; Parker Pearson 2007:142; Watkins 2010; Hodder 2010a:340, 348, 353; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:142; Joyce and Barber 2015:835). However, the precise way in which rituals could create religious or political power has remained nebulous. At most, the existing explanations simply attribute major religious constructions to the power of beliefs and rituals without anchoring explanations in more tangible facets of culture. Alternatively, explanations have appealed to various social stresses that rituals purportedly helped alleviate. In contrast, secret societies have the potential of linking ideologies and rituals to the acquisition of power and particularly to explain why religion or ritual has played such an important role in the emergence of more and more complex societies leading up to civilization.

As yet, the potential importance of secret societies has gone largely unrecognized in archaeological theoretical worlds. Where there have been attempts to identify and situate secret societies, or “religious sodalities,” in broader cultural dynamics, as in the American Southwest, the architectural remains have generally been interpreted in functional terms, especially as a ritual means for reducing social tensions and binding amalgamated kinship groups together in the same community (notable exceptions include Gamble 2008, and Ware 2014). This functionalist interpretation is in stark contrast to the ethnographic accounts of secret societies which the following chapters illustrate.

In Europe and Asia, the very concept of a secret society seems to be unknown or not well understood among archaeologists. The recent weighty tome on the prehistory of religion from Oxford University Press (Insoll 2011) does not even have an index entry for secret societies or ritual sodalities, and there is no discussion devoted to them other than two very brief passages. This lack of attention by archaeologists is curious since the anthropological literature describes secret societies as playing prominent roles in community dynamics. Given the widespread ethnographic occurrence of secret societies in tribal societies, it would indeed be surprising if secret societies did not play important roles in many prehistoric cultures throughout the world. The goal of this book is to help rescue secret societies from this state of oblivion in archaeology and to demonstrate that they likely played pivotal roles in socio-political and religious developments in the past. I am convinced that they constitute a sort of “missing link” in the cultural evolution of more complex societies.

I have been investigating secret societies for more than twenty-five years and have concluded that they provide a critical link in our understanding of how individuals augmented their power in many communities and regions. I first became alerted to the potential importance of secret societies when D’Ann Owens undertook a study for me of the ritual contexts of children’s handprints and footprints in the Upper Paleolithic painted caves of France. In order to understand what those rituals may have been like, she examined

the ethnographies of complex hunter/gatherers to see what kinds of rituals children were involved in. Owens concluded that the most likely context for children's participation in rituals was secret societies (Owens and Hayden 1997).

On the basis of that study, I realized that secret societies not only could be potentially identified in the archaeological remains of complex hunter/gatherer and tribal cultures, but that secret societies were often the most powerful organizations in those societies. Moreover, the power they wielded cross-cut kinship and even community boundaries. Serendipitously, in my own excavations at the Keatley Creek site on the Canadian Plateau, there were several puzzling small structures about 100–200 meters from the core of that large prehistoric village of complex hunter/gatherers. I initially thought that these small outlying structures might be dwellings of outcasts, migrants, specialized hunters, possibly shamans, or women's menstrual houses. However, after Owens' study, and given the very secluded nature of the structures on the outskirts of the residential area at Keatley Creek, together with the ethnographically documented existence of secret societies during the nineteenth century in the locality, it occurred to me that these might be specialized ritual structures used by secret societies. Subsequent investigations of those structures have largely confirmed this interpretation (Hayden 1998; Hayden and Adams 2004; Sheppard 2007; Morin 2010; Villeneuve 2012), a topic that will be discussed further in Chapter 10.

Given these developments, together with my ongoing interest in aggrandizer strategies for promoting aggrandizers' own self-interests (Hayden 2001, 2014), I was keen to find out more about the underlying nature of secret societies, and was fortunate to have Suzanne Villeneuve take up the research program dealing with the small peripheral structures at Keatley Creek. She became intrigued by the issues involved and has vigorously pursued additional research projects related to the possibilities and problems surrounding these structures. The following chapters owe a great debt to the early ethnographies, and I hope that many readers will find the resulting observations and thoughts as exciting as I do. Thus, I would like to begin with some discussion of why secret societies are important for archaeologists and exactly what a secret society is.

#### WHY ARE SECRET SOCIETIES IMPORTANT?

The preceding comments provide a general background for understanding why archaeologists and anthropologists should be interested in secret societies. More specifically, these reasons can be enumerated as follows.

First, secret societies are recognized in their own communities as being important and powerful, often embodying the most elaborate traditions of their cultures in terms of ritual, art, music, food, dance, costumes, and language – all

aspects that make individual social groups unique and contribute to their cultural identities.

Second, secret societies only appear to emerge among transegalitarian (complex) hunter/gatherers and subsequent agricultural tribal or chiefdom societies (Driver 1969:349,360,365,396; Owens and Hayden 1997; Johansen 2004). As such, they constitute a relatively recent phenomenon in cultural evolution, likely extending back only to the Upper Paleolithic, or in exceptional circumstances perhaps back to the Middle Paleolithic.

Third, because the most powerful members of communities generally dominate the highest ranks of secret societies, and because they control significant resources and means to advance their own hegemonic control in the community, secret societies constitute powerful driving forces for cultural changes including major changes in ideologies, cultural values, and beliefs, as well as new sociopolitical relationships including an increased centralization of power.

Fourth, secret societies generally include members from different kinship groups and even communities, thus establishing a supra-kinship and supra-community level of organization, control, and power with a far wider demographic and economic base than otherwise might have existed. Secret societies, therefore, could have served ambitious individuals as the means for establishing community and regional political organizations with centralized control. Ware (2014:114,194) emphasizes that ritual sodalities in the American Southwest were regional organizations that often encompassed different linguistic and ethnic groups. Other ethnographers have explicitly linked the development of secret societies to the limitations of kinship systems for developing political control (e.g., Chapters 2 and 7). Such regional organization also characterized the American Northwest Coast, the Great Plains, the Great Lakes, California, Africa, and Melanesia. Thus, secret societies have a strong tendency to form far-reaching regional networks or interaction spheres.

Fifth, secret societies are important because they constitute a major means for extracting surplus resources and wealth from community members and for concentrating these surpluses in the hands of a few individuals. Moreover, they only appear to have occurred in areas capable of producing significant surpluses. Both the carrot and the stick were often employed, with rewards for those who contributed and intimidation or coercion used for those who were reluctant contributors. Supernatural justifications for these levies and physical means of enforcing requisitions typified many secret societies.

Sixth, secret societies may have led to the development of some of the most notable prehistoric ritual centers and ultimately to the formation of regional state religions. Archaeologists have long been aware that religious institutions seem to have played key roles in the emergence of political complexity, from the first “communal buildings” or shrines of the Neolithic, or even the Epipaleolithic, to the dominating temple or mortuary mounds or megaliths



of early chiefdoms, to the impressive ziggurats and pyramids of the first states. The scale of investment and the artistic efforts devoted to religious institutions dwarf any other undertaking in these polities that archaeologists have detected. Yet, for a long time, attempting to deal with religion was considered a hopeless task by many archaeologists, as exemplified by Hawkes' (1954) dictum that religion and ideology are the least accessible, if not totally inaccessible, aspects of prehistory. Similarly, in an interview in *The Mystery of Stonehenge*, Atkinson stated that when archaeologists reach for past people's minds, they slip through your fingers like sand (CBS 1965). As a result, for a long time, the reason why religion was so central to the emergence of political complexity was viewed in terms of religious fanaticism or other mysterious factors. It has only been recently that ethnographers, ethnoarchaeologists, and archaeologists have begun to investigate the link between politics and religion (Aldenderfer 1998:304–5; 2010; Dietler 2001:70; B. Hayden 2003; Whitley and Hays-Gilpin 2008). I argue that it is no happenstance that chiefs and early kings played prominent roles in rituals and feasts. Because of the political roles that secret society members played within – and between – communities, secret societies appear to have considerable potential for understanding why ritual and religion were such central elements in the early development of political systems. It can be argued that secret societies were the first institutionalized manifestation of ritual organizations linked to political power, and that this was, in fact, the explicit goal of secret societies. Therefore, the political dimension of secret societies may be critical to understanding the evolution of political systems.

Seventh, secret societies play important roles in lower or middle range archaeological theory. They are eminently visible archaeologically, especially where caves or specialized structures were used. They had ideological characteristics which help to explain the changes in iconography that characterize key periods in the archaeological record in certain areas, such as the European and Near Eastern Neolithic, and even the Upper Paleolithic. And the existence of secret societies helps explain unusual features of the archaeological record such as the use of deep caves, therianthrope images, human sacrifices, and cannibalism.

Thus, there are a variety of important reasons why archaeologists should be interested in secret societies. It should be emphasized, however, that no claims are being made for the universal occurrence of secret societies in the development of complex societies, especially since alternative organizational frameworks could serve similar functions of extending political control beyond kin groups. Alternatives to secret societies could have included: saroans (large-scale work exchange groups), hunting societies, feasting societies, military and marital alliances, age grades, village administrations, extending kin networks to clan–phratry–moity dimensions, pilgrimage organizations, other types of sodalities, and spirit quests. Nevertheless, secret societies appear to have been relatively common at the transegalitarian and chiefdom levels, and they were

powerful tools for promoting the self-interests of ambitious individuals, especially in terms of political control.

The main emphasis in the opening chapters of this book will be on complex hunter/gatherers since they represent the first clearly recognizable step in this trajectory, long before agriculture was introduced. If we are to understand the reasons why secret societies formed, the contexts that they emerged in, and their impacts on existing social or political frameworks, it will be critical to examine complex hunter/gatherer societies. But first, it will be useful to obtain a few more insights into the nature and the character of secret societies.

#### WHAT IS THE SECRET?

One misconception needs to be addressed from the outset. The term “secret society” instills visions of clandestine meetings by people whose memberships and activities are carefully concealed from public scrutiny. In fact, this is not what is secret in secret societies. Instead of a hidden existence for these ritual organizations or a membership that was kept secret, everyone was usually well aware of the existence of these societies and knew who belonged to them (e.g., Brandt 1977:22). Members even flaunted the fact that they had been initiated, and they usually put on public displays to awe everyone in their communities with their arcane and profane powers.

The real “secret” was the ritual knowledge that members claimed was the key to their supposed arcane supernatural powers. The most important secrets were known only by the highest ranking members of secret societies. As Brandt (1980:130) observed among the Hopi, the secrecy was internal, not external. Secret knowledge was kept from lower ranking members as well as from the public. Such knowledge was typically supernatural in nature but need not have been.

#### BEHIND THE SECRET DOOR: A DEFINITION

In anthropology, any non-kinship organization is referred to as a “sodality.” Sodalities can be organizations based on politics, sports, occupational specializations, rituals, music, dance, military roles, or almost any other activities. Secret societies are a ritual type of sodality (Driver 1969). However, there can be many different types of ritual sodalities. Secret societies differ from other types of religious sodalities in a number of key respects, according to Warren and Laslett (1980:26–31) and Johansen (2004:13). At one end of the spectrum are inclusive or “open associations,” such as religious-based charity organizations which welcome participation from anyone and have no secret doctrines. At the other end of the spectrum are “secret associations,” or secret societies, which exhibit exclusive access to knowledge that is generally used for

purposes of controlling spirits as well as controlling people. Characteristically, membership in these organizations, at least for the higher ranks, is voluntary and based on the ability to pay progressively exorbitant advancement fees. The political position of a family in the community is often important as well. Many, but not all, activities are concealed from the public. When many researchers refer to “ritual sodalities,” as is common in the American Southwest, they almost always are referring to secret society types of organizations.

There have been a number of attempts to define secret societies in more specific terms. Wedgewood’s (1930:131–2) definition of secret society is “a voluntary association whose members are possessed of some knowledge of which non-members are ignorant.”

I prefer to be a little more specific and to follow Johansen (2004:10) in defining a secret society as *an association with internal ranks in which membership, especially in upper ranks, is exclusive, voluntary, and associated with secret knowledge.*

Entrance and advancement fees are one of the hallmarks of secret societies as a means of excluding those deemed undesirable (Loeb 1929:256). Like pyramid schemes everywhere, secret societies provide the greatest benefits to those in the upper ranks. In order to distinguish these types of organizations from relatively elaborate tribal initiations, it may be necessary to include the stipulation that secret societies – at least in their more developed forms, as opposed to the derivative types discussed below, see “Classifications” – involve the production and surrender of significant surpluses, or even that they involve power-based (or defensive) motivations in their organization as well as in the recruitment of members. Because of the variability displayed in ritual organizations that have been identified as secret societies by various authors, it may eventually prove to be necessary to use a looser, more polythetic approach to defining secret societies. In polythetic classifications, no one criterion is absolutely essential as long as most criteria are met. However, such an involved undertaking is beyond the scope of this book and a task for the future. For the present purposes, it is sufficient to be able to discuss some of the major recognized examples of secret societies in the ethnographic literature.

#### TRIBAL INITIATIONS, SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS, ORIGINS, AND GRAY AREAS

Despite the best attempts to craft a definition of secret societies, there remains a gray area in which secret societies can be difficult to distinguish from other organizations. This is especially true when dealing with elaborate tribal initiations such as occur in some Australian Aboriginal societies (a problem recognized by Webster 1932:90–2; Elkin 1945:4; Eliade 1964:65), as well as among American Plains cultures with their age grades or warrior societies (Peters 1995:52). Other examples of gray areas involve the induction of all boys

in a community into the lower ranks of some secret societies such as those in Melanesia and in New Guinea (Eliade 1964:65), the West African groups that adopted the *Poro* (MacKenzie 1967:26), and Nuuchalnulth groups in which the Wolf Society was prominent. In the inclusion of all males, and sometimes all females, they resembled tribal initiations. However, in these widely recognized examples of secret societies, there existed subsequent higher grades of secret knowledge to which far fewer individuals had access and these high-ranking members were generally the most powerful and wealthy people in hereditary descent groups. In effect, the general level of initiation versus the more restricted levels of initiation can be viewed as separate ritual organizations with the higher ranks constituting the core of the secret societies. This situation is surprisingly common in organizations that anthropologists have labeled as secret societies, many of which are considered classic examples such as the *Poro*, *Ekkpo*, *Suque*, and Wolf Societies. However, similar types of organizations have not generally been considered secret societies in Australia (see Chapter 7).

Several anthropologists have interpreted these and other features as indications that secret societies originated from tribal initiations through a process of progressive restriction of membership at later initiation stages (possibly through age grading) which required specific abilities, kin group membership, and wealth (Webster 1932:2,20,76,83,93–4,135). Other commonalities with tribal initiations include the hard physical ordeals involved, the frequent death and rebirth themes, seclusion periods, special clubhouses or men's houses, and rituals of reintroduction into mainstream society often with new identities of initiates (Webster 1932:2,135).

However, a key difference is that, in general, tribal initiations function to prepare adolescents to take on adult roles, to marry, and to maintain community traditions (Webster 1932:139). In contrast, secret societies seem to function to concentrate power in the hands of a few exclusive high-ranking individuals who control the organization and who try to further their own interests, thus constituting a "rude but powerful aristocracy" (Webster 1932:78,83). However, the same thing has sometimes been said about Australian Aborigine initiations that are not generally considered as secret societies (see Chapter 7).

Early in the twentieth century, Wedgewood (1930:134–5) raised this issue, stating that initiation into secret societies and initiation into a community of males in Melanesia "often bear a close resemblance to one another, for in both the candidate or novice is apprised of some secret or secrets of which formerly he was ignorant. But ... from a sociological point of view they are distinct, the one being optional in the limited degree indicated ... the other compulsory." Membership in secret societies "is not preordained ... as is membership of family, clan, or tribe."

As suggested in the discussion of definitions, one possible way to distinguish secret societies from tribal initiations may be on the basis of the production

and surrender of surplus production (wealth) from the initiate's family. This is generally not a prominent feature of tribal initiations. In Webster's (1932:104) view, with the emergence of secret societies "religious aspects become more and more a delusion and serve as a cloak to hide merely material and selfish ends." There are also varying degrees of ritual knowledge that are involved in membership in different societies. In organizations where little ritual knowledge is involved, the issue must be addressed as to whether they are fundamentally secret societies or societies based mainly on some other kind of common interests such as warfare, social entertainment, wealth acquisition, or mutual help, with only a superficial overlay of ritual secrecy.

In fact, all of the above kinds of organizations (tribal initiations, age grades, social or entertainment sodalities, military associations, and others) may co-exist in a community and blend into secret societies, creating considerable confusion in any attempt to unravel the importance of secret societies. In addition, ethnographers have largely focused almost exclusively on the more impressive main secret societies with only occasional passing references to minor secret societies, which sometimes were prolific and exhibited somewhat different features, such as defending members from the depredations of more powerful secret societies.

Another complication is that some groups such as the Pueblos of the American Southwest and communities in Vanuatu had numerous secret societies. While all males were not required to join any one particular society, *all* males were expected to become members of one society of their choice. Such situations raise further difficulties in terms of recognizing exclusive ritual organizations unless there was a ranked hierarchy of such organizations, which there usually was.

In addition to these considerations, secret societies sometimes took the form of military fraternities and involved ancestor worship, thus blurring the distinctions between these different types of organization. However, ancestor worship can be distinguished on the basis of an exclusive worship of ancestors within a lineage, whereas the invocation of "ancestors" in secret society contexts included ancestors from different kinship groups, and often simply pertained to previous office holders in the secret society, whether related by kinship or not.

Thus, defining secret societies and distinguishing them from other types of organizations is far from straightforward. Hence, I have attempted to deal with the clearest ethnographic examples of secret societies in the following chapters.

## ORIGINS

As just noted, some ethnographers have viewed secret societies as developing out of tribal initiations (e.g., Webster 1932). In contrast, on America's Northwest

Coast, Drucker (1941:229–30) viewed secret societies as resulting from a fusion of shamanism, warfare, mythological elements, hereditary privileges, potlatching, and the guardian spirit complex. Garfield and Wingert (1977:46) also noted the strong resemblance of secret society initiations to individual guardian spirit quests, and one might add, shamanic initiations. Certainly, there were many shamanic elements in secret societies, including possession, throwing power, use of prestidigitation, curing, and often even the honorific title conferred on secret society members of “shaman” (Drucker 1941:229–30). In fact, Eliade (1964:313) stated that “the relations between shamanism and the various North American secret societies and mystical movements is decidedly complex and far from being solved.” “The chief difference between traditional shamanism and the secret societies lies in the fact that the latter are open to anyone who displays some predisposition to ecstasy, who is willing to pay the required fee, and, above all, who consents to submit to the necessary apprenticeship and initiatory ordeals” (Eliade 1964:314). Shamanic circles tend to be exclusive, whereas “secret societies ... display a quite marked spirit of proselytism that ... tends to abolish the special privilege of shamans” (Eliade 1964:314). In general, “shamans usually share in the activities of the most important secret societies, and sometimes take them over entirely” (Eliade 1964:315). Although the formal issue of *how* secret societies emerged can be debated (whether from shamanism, tribal initiations, military organizations, or other origins), this issue is not of critical importance to the focus of the present study, which is more concerned with *why* secret societies were created and what sociopolitical roles they played.

## CLASSIFICATIONS

While a number of anthropologists have proposed classifications of secret societies, from an archaeological perspective these have not been very useful or insightful. Some of the suggested distinctions have involved:

- 1 Classifications by stated function or declared purpose, e.g., political, militaristic, moralist, civic, professional, or patriotic (MacKenzie 1967:16).
- 2 Dichotomous classifications based on the distinction between support for existing political leaders and those who oppose existing leaders (Walter 1969; Tefft 1980a:14). The formation of secret societies that oppose the existing political structure is probably most characteristic of state-level societies or colonial situations; however, precursors may have existed in some transegalitarian or chiefdom-level societies where competing secret societies developed to defend members from predatory activities of the dominant secret societies. Some traditional secret societies were also created in attempts to rival the power of the dominant secret societies.

- 3 Other dichotomous classifications distinguish between secret societies that benefit members and non-members alike (i.e., ones that benefit the entire community) and those that benefit only the members at the expense of the community. Wedgwood characterized the latter organizations as a pathological development (1930:135–6). As will become apparent in the following chapters, I suspect that this distinction was based primarily on Wedgwood's theoretical commitment to a structuralist-functionalist view of culture as well as an over-reliance on the public rhetoric of secret society members rather than their actual practices.

For the purpose of the present analysis, neither the rhetoric of secret societies nor their publicly expressed purposes (special abilities or functions) are critical for understanding their underlying nature or their reasons for existing. While social anthropological classifications may not be of great use for archaeological purposes, or for understanding the underlying dynamics of secret societies, it is nevertheless important to recognize that there was considerable diversity within the rubric of secret societies. Like the ethnographic record on traditional feasting, most ethnographic observers seem to have focused almost exclusively on the biggest and most dramatic manifestations of secret societies while largely ignoring smaller, less flamboyant versions which generally lacked significant power, memberships, or resources. Thus, except for some minor details, we simply do not know what the smaller, less important secret societies were like.

For my purposes, I find it useful to recognize the following distinctions based largely on the extent to which power was pursued and the ability to pursue it.

- 1 *Power-oriented societies.* These are the classic cases of secret societies as described in the most prominent ethnographies and I suspect represent the initial form of the first secret societies. Examples include the *Hamatsa*, the *Poro*, the *Ekkpo*, and the *Suque* Societies, which often used terror indiscriminately to enforce their grip on power. However, distinctions also need to be made between the dominant, highest-ranked secret societies, and the much smaller, weaker, upstart, “wannabe,” ephemeral secret societies that constantly appeared and disappeared as on the Plains and the Northwest Coast, which may have had much lower admission and advancement costs, or even none at all, so as to attract people to become members. We can expect that as such startup societies became more popular and powerful, their initiation and advancement costs increased proportionately.
- 2 *Militaristic secret societies.* These societies also generally emphasized the exercise of power in communities, but were largely concerned with developing or acquiring protective medicines and/or guardian spirits that would make members immune to attacks in battles. As with power-based secret societies, there was probably a

range of sizes and powers among these societies, with one or a few being dominant and others being of minor importance.

- 3 *Curing and fertility societies.* Ostensibly, these societies were benevolent and operated for the benefit of their community without the use of terror. However, they typically charged high fees for cures or rituals, and in a number of cases, members reportedly induced sicknesses in non-members in order to obtain substantial fees for the cures. This could be considered a subtler form of terror tactic. There was probably a range of sizes and powers among these societies, with one or a few being dominant and others being of minor importance.
- 4 *Defensive secret societies.* These formed in some areas like Africa in order to defend members from the predatory attacks of the dominant power-oriented societies. They can be considered as a derivative type of the power-oriented and militaristic types. Defensive societies may also have had nominal or no initiation and advancement costs in order to swell their ranks and create greater defensive power in numbers. However, information on these societies is very limited and it is not clear how central any secret supernatural knowledge was in these organizations.

There may be other distinctions that would be useful; however, for the moment, the preceding distinctions are the main factors of concern. In most of this book, I will be focusing on the first and second types of secret societies, the power-oriented societies and the militaristic societies, since these are overwhelmingly the types reported in the ethnographies, and since they were arguably the most important forces in their communities, especially in creating important cultural changes. I will also propose a more evolved type of *regional secret society polity* in Chapters 10 and 11.

#### GENERAL CONTEXTS

An early map showing the distribution of known cultures with secret societies was published by Loeb (1929:286). However, subsequent ethnographic work and considerations have added to these areas, as suggested by the consideration of the Maya cargo system (Chapter 4) and European Benandanti or Calusari cults (Chapter 10) as secret societies. It is of considerable interest to note that secret society initiations are usually lacking in areas of high culture as well as among most generalized hunter/gatherers (Loeb 1929:285–6; Driver 1969:349,360,396).

In general, secret societies tend to have occurred in complex transegalitarian societies (whether hunter/gatherers or horticulturalists) and chiefdoms. I have argued that secret societies were one of a number of resource-based strategies (including feasting, prestige items, high funerary costs, high marriage costs, and military alliances) used by ambitious individuals



to increase their control over people and resources (B. Hayden 2003). In more general terms, Marx and Engels (1968) viewed social complexity as developing when the production of goods beyond subsistence requirements resulted in the production of surpluses used for other purposes. In contrast, Morton Fried (1967) argued that complexity emerged from shortages engendered by population growth with control of resources retained by original owners. At least in the case of the American Western Pueblos, according to Levy (1992:38,42), the best land was owned by clans, with the highest ranked clan controlling twice as much land as was needed for their subsistence needs. There was no obligatory sharing of maize harvests. Levy (1992:55) maintained that access to land was obtained by acquiring ritual roles. However, owing to the high costs of obtaining ritual paraphernalia and hosting the required ritual feasts, it can be argued that the main factor in acquiring ritual roles was owning productive land or at least acquiring access to its produce. It seems clear that in a broader context, ritual complexity, with its attendant political complexity, was fundamentally associated with surplus production either by one's family or of extended kin or others. Similarly, among hunters and gatherers, secret societies occurred where surpluses could be produced rather than in stressed environments (see especially Chapters 2 and 3).

These notions make good sense in terms of Driver's (1969:349,360,396) and Ware's (2014:34) observations that ritual sodalities were rare in simple hunting/gathering societies but common in tribal societies where they often had warrior overtones or foci (Ware 2014:35). Driver (1969:349) categorically states that secret societies were "possible only in a society with a large surplus of food and other necessities." However, Ware (2014) and others also argued that secret societies were rare in complex polities like states. Whether this was a general pattern or not still requires some analysis, but, as discussed in Chapter 11, there appear to have been instances where other state-level organizations, including state religions, evolved from secret societies and supplanted the original types of secret organizations.

## MOTIVATIONS

Some ethnographers have argued that secret societies were formed to benefit the community, such as by healing the sick or planting sacred tobacco to preserve the tribe and the culture (e.g., the Crow Tobacco Society mentioned by Wedgewood 1930:136–7). Wedgewood reflects the structural-functionalist bias of her time, maintaining that social institutions continued to exist only if they fulfilled a definite function and played a significant role in the life of a society (Wedgewood 1930:129). Some of the most commonly cited beneficial roles of secret societies include healing and judicial functions, e.g., the *Egbo*

Society (Calabar), the *Esu* and *Ogboni* Societies (Yoruba), the *Yewe* Society (Gold Coast), and the *Tenda* Society (French Guinea).

Probably the motive most frequently invoked by archaeologists to explain ritual elaboration, including the development of kivas and ritual sodalities, has also involved a structural-functionalist model. Above all, social unity or integration has been viewed as the main motivator for ritual developments, especially in the American Southwest where “ceremonial life was sufficient to prevent the alienation of the common people” (Levy 1992:69,78). This school of interpretation has also been strongly represented in the Middle East where the most popular view among archaeologists is still that social solidarity was the major concern for the growing communities of complex hunter/gatherers and early Neolithic horticulturalists. The result has been that almost all evidence of ritual or ritual organizations or practices has been interpreted as functioning to *integrate* diverse groups and interests in the growing communities (Bar-Yosef and Belfer Cohen 1989:488–90; 1991:189; Kuijt 1996; 2000; Bar-Yosef 2001:7; 2002:104; Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2008; Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris 2013; Grosman and Munro 2016; for the Southwest, see Longacre 1964; Hill 1966; Levy 1992:57,69,78; McGuire and Saitta 1996:209–11; and others cited in Ware 2014:14). However, it might be briefly noted that if the role of secret societies was to promote social solidarity within communities, one should expect a single organization within communities that had a large ceremonial facility to accommodate many people. Instead, there were frequently two or three or more secret society organizations using small ritual buildings within communities which makes sense primarily in more exclusive competitive contexts. This is discussed further in Chapters 10 and 11.

Other functionalist views of Southwestern religion have maintained that ritual societies operated primarily to redistribute agricultural products. McGuire and Saitta (1996:209–11) proposed that the hierarchies in secret societies of the Southwest were adaptive in the context of recurring times of stress by securing resources for original inhabitants or high-ranking members while forcing others to find alternative sources of food, e.g., by resorting to hunting and gathering (McGuire and Saitta 1996:209).

In contrast to these functionalist or communitarian models, another strong tradition in anthropology, extending back to Marx, views control over ritual as a means to dominate political power and others (Bloch 1974; Whitehouse 1992:147–9; Dietler 2001:70). Where this is true, Whitehouse argues that “religious knowledge is regarded as both powerful and dangerous,” especially to the untrained, and that “religious language and ritual serves to express and reinforce relations of authority; it works therefore not in the interests of society as a whole, but in those of the religious leaders” (Whitehouse 1992:149–50; see also Bloch 1974). The key link in the dynamics of such organizations is promoting religious knowledge as being “vital to the health of society,” so that

“access to such knowledge would provide a route to political power, while exclusion from it would be a critical disadvantage” (Whitehouse 1992:152).

This view of secret societies is in fundamental agreement with the vast majority of ethnographic observations as well as with the political ecological approach that I have espoused (Hayden 2014). Political ecology, or paleo-political ecology to be more precise, studies the ways in which surplus production has been used by ambitious, aggrandizing individuals to obtain benefits for themselves, including survival, reproduction, security, wealth, political power, and higher standards of living. In the political ecology view that I adopt in this book, both feasts and secret societies constitute major aggrandizer strategies for achieving these goals *based on the production and control of surplus resources*, especially in the form of reciprocal feasting debts or as fees for the admission, advancement, or services of secret societies.

The ethnographic record provides considerable support for the political ecology interpretation of secret societies. The motive behind prospective initiates willingly paying the typically high prices for initiation and advancement was sometimes explicitly stated to be the prospect of gaining even more power and wealth in the community by attaining a higher rank in the secret society. In contrast to the altruistic motives expressed by Wedgewood, she elsewhere admitted that “more selfish and less exalted motives do doubtless influence a man in seeking membership ... [t]he lure which is held out to them is the lure of prestige,” and that some societies performed no religious rites on behalf of the community (Wedgewood 1930:138). In even more blatant terms, she later states that “if the members of a secret association are to enjoy the sense of power and privilege, the acquisition of which was one of their reasons for becoming members, they must, as it were, demonstrate their secrecy publicly ... they must make themselves felt as a force” (Wedgewood 1930:144).

After reviewing secret societies in a number of different cultures, Johansen (2004) concluded that the underlying motivation of the organizers of secret societies was to promote their own self-interests by creating a hegemonic control over rituals and experiences that they claimed gave them supernatural powers or influence. From the examples that will be discussed in the following chapters, I concur completely with Johansen. While few members or leaders of secret societies might overtly express their motivations in such self-serving terms (although some did), actions speak louder than words; and, as will be seen, their actions seem difficult to interpret in terms other than the promotion of members’ self-interests. As Simmel (1950:367) stated: “The secret group pursues its own purposes with the same inconsiderateness for all purposes outside itself which, in the case of the individual, is precisely called egoism.”

Toward this end, in general, Wolf (1999:69) maintained that constructed connections with supernatural forces could be used to provide elites a unique cosmological aura that allowed them to promote their authority and others’

obedience to them in a socially acceptable manner. Even here, just how socially acceptable some of the practices were is very questionable.

Secret society organizations often transparently functioned to maintain or extend political and economic control. For example, the *Tamate Livoa* Society in the Banks Islands was used by chiefs to enforce peace among villages (Bradfield 1973, cited in Tefft 1980b:53) and the *Poro* Society of the Mende (Sierra Leone) was used by chiefs to police their territories and ensure proper responses to the directions of paramount chiefs (Bozeman 1976, cited in Tefft 1980b:53). Similarly, the leaders of Taos pueblo ritual sodalities constituted the political leadership (Brandt 1977:17,19,24–5).

If the main underlying motive of secret societies was the concentration of power and surplus production, then it makes sense that internal hierarchies would be a key component of the organizational structures. The public display of the power and wealth of the society also makes sense if the basic motivation was to enhance members' own powers, since success and wealth were generally portrayed by secret societies as an indication of spiritual power (see Hayden 2014). This is one of the many ideological transformations that ambitious individuals undoubtedly promulgated to serve their own ends. As previously noted, wealth was also an essential element for initiation and advancement – yet another example of an ideological construct devised to enhance benefits for higher ranking members. None of these, or other, features of secret societies are comprehensible if the purpose of secret societies was to provide benefits for the entire community.

In addition to these ethnographic observations, psychological studies tend to support the self-interested motives of secret society organizers and the general view that aggrandizer personality types dominated secret societies. Notably, Piff et al. (2012:4086) found that “upper-class individuals behave more unethically than lower-class individuals ... were more likely to take valued goods from others ... to lie in a negotiation ... to cheat to increase their chances of winning a prize ... and endorse unethical behavior at work.” They had “more favorable attitudes toward greed.” As will be shown, these are precisely the kinds of attitudes that characterize secret society officials, as well as aggrandizers in general and sociopaths in particular (Hare 1993). Piff (2013) has also found that as wealth increases, the wealthy are more likely to feel entitled to good things, and that they see themselves as above normal laws and morals – an aspect of tribal and chiefly aggrandizers repeatedly observed by ethnographers (see Hayden 2014, 2016). These are also noted characteristics of many of the high-ranking secret society leaders to be described. The wealthy tend to morally defend greed and to be more indifferent to others. The more resources they have, the more they generally want and the more they prioritize their self-interests and are willing to do things to serve their self-interests. Clearly, not everyone in any given population has or had these

attitudes, and such tendencies may be sharply curtailed where surpluses are less certain (e.g., the American Southwest). However, a small percentage of all populations do have aggrandizer traits strongly developed, and it seems that they, by and large, become the elites and gravitate toward positions of power, including memberships and high positions in secret societies. They are relentlessly aggressive in getting what they want and in trying to change attitudes, norms, and rules to favor their strategies.

## KEY ISSUES

### *Social Integration vs. Competition and Division*

As just discussed, there are major differences of opinion on whether secret societies were established for the good of the community or for the self-interests of secret society members, especially the high-ranking members. Related to this is the issue of whether secret societies served as socially integrative organizations, as so often claimed by archaeologists, or whether they actually increased socio-economic and political inequalities, divisiveness, and factionalization.

### *The Power of Belief vs. the Power of Power*

Whether many of the high-ranking members of secret societies, or their followers, or the general populace, actually believed in claims by members to possess supernatural powers is difficult to determine, especially given the substantial variations that characterize beliefs between individuals. It seems highly unlikely that everyone in a community believed everything that they were taught, or all the claims that others promoted including members of secret societies. Undoubtedly some people did believe various claims, but equally certain from the accounts of secret societies is the fact that many people did not believe the claims but simply viewed them as a means of manipulating people. Even if people exhibited public compliance to beliefs or norms, this would not necessarily have meant that they privately believed in them or even accepted them (Willer et al. 2009). In many cases, outward compliance to norms or beliefs was due to external pressures rather than any acceptance of beliefs.

Nor was there any lack of overt skeptics who mocked the standard beliefs. In medieval Europe – supposedly governed by superstition and belief – the “prior of Holy Trinity, London reported in 1200 that ‘many believe neither in good nor in bad angels, nor in life or death or any other spiritual things which they cannot see with their own eyes.’ There were scoffers, complained Vincent of Beauvais, who openly laughed at graphic representations of Hell” (Sumption 1975:19). Tribal societies were no different. Many individuals in tribal societies

were indifferent to religious claims. Reay (1959:131) reported that most Kuma individuals in New Guinea did not have a working knowledge of their own religious doctrines or myths, even though these were readily accessible. Barth (1987:69,71) found that doctrines were important in New Guinea cults but that they were mostly viewed as metaphors and not really believed in. He also documented, even within very small-scale societies, great variability in views, interests, and knowledge about sacred matters (Barth 1987:78). Jean Clottes (2016:57) provides an example of a native guide who did not believe in spirits, yet conducted propitiation rituals before entering sacred sites. The Chin expressed an “indifferent faith” in the gods, and Lehman (1963:175,207) doubted that all people believed in gods. Among the Lamet in Laos, Izikowitz (1951:321) reported that about 10 percent of the community was agnostic or atheistic, and I found a similar proportion of skeptics among the Highland Maya villages where I worked. Indeed, in the following chapters, there are repeated references to “doubters” of secret society claims and the need to ferret out those individuals and deal with them (see the “Enforcement” sections in Chapters 2–9). Many of the Osage were indifferent to priestly concerns about religion (Bailey 1995). The beliefs among the Omaha concerning the supernatural and religious claims ranged from acceptance to skepticism to rejection (Fortune 1932:53,55). While some Osage may have believed that sacred bundles harbored mysterious and dangerous powers, others considered bundles simply as adjuncts to rituals without any power (Bailey 1995:47,62,278–9). Other elite or secret society ideologies were clearly not accepted by many commoners who were portrayed as “irreverent.” In fact, most people displayed little interest in sacred knowledge (Bailey 1995). A similar range of beliefs has been reported by Metcalf (1996:271,279) concerning headhunting in Borneo. He concluded that there was a lack of dogma in almost all traditional religions; ritual praxis was far more important than beliefs. In fact, anything could be used to stand for anything else, as he paraphrases Needham. This is similar to Leach’s (1954:x,4,14,106) study of social norms in Kachin society, where there were so many conflicting and contradictory statements that Leach concluded there was no cultural system. There were only contingent claims that were called upon depending upon circumstances and the motives of the actors. Barth (1987:78–85) found the same to be true in New Guinea. Thus, although some ethnographers reported that initiations into secret societies could have resulted in an increased religious feeling for some people, such initiations only created disillusionment and degradation of religious feeling for others (e.g., Fortune 1932:4). These observations indicate that it is unrealistic to view the so-called power of belief as a major force for cultural change in tribal societies without other factors being strongly involved.

Rather than viewing specific beliefs or values as being universally held by entire communities – as seems typical of archaeological discussions and even

most ethnographies – it is probably more realistic to view beliefs as varying widely, encompassing even mutually incompatible beliefs. Some claims of beliefs could thus be drawn upon at certain times and under certain conditions (e.g., the biblical turning the other cheek), while other beliefs could be used at other times and conditions (e.g., biblical enjoinders to take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). Following Leach (1954:x,4–5), it seems more accurate to view beliefs and values like tools to be taken out, given lip service, and appealed to when needed or appropriate to serve as a warrant for particular behavior, decisions, or actions. Under certain conditions, some expressions of belief might have responded better to the interests of the majority or to special interest groups, but everything was constantly in flux and could change, much like the fluctuating quantum states of matter that have varying probabilities of existing or coming into existence over time. From this perspective, the widespread occurrence of, or major changes in, specific beliefs – or at least expressions of beliefs and actual ritual behavior – would have had to involve clear practical benefits for them to be widely accepted and to spread. Examining secret societies may provide important insights into how this could have been achieved.

Thus, as Harris (1979) has argued, beliefs *per se* are probably not the most important factor in explaining cultural practices or developments like the building of megaliths or temples or the acquisition of power by chiefs. Moreover, it is almost impossible to determine or untangle the complex web of specific beliefs of individuals in living populations, much less what they were in prehistoric populations. What was of the utmost importance in tribal religions was praxis, or conformity to required public behavior. Actual beliefs were largely irrelevant (B. Hayden 2003).

A number of strategies could be used to leverage acquiescence for public acceptance of ideological claims and practices. Strategies probably included the use of food gifts to obtain tacit acceptance of hosts' claims made in the context of feasts (e.g., concerning ancestry, the power of ancestors or talismans, the costs of marriages, the favor of the gods, and similar claims), leverage exerted via debt relationships, simple verbal claims and arguments, and the judicious use of threats or even force to obtain compliance. Sociologists have made some important studies of why people acquiesce to demands for compliance in ritual support or behavior (Willer et al. 2009). They have noted that it is generally difficult to distinguish true convictions from social posturing (452) and that frequently, private attitudes and beliefs differ from publicly expressed attitudes even though the public behavior conforms to cultural norms or ideals (456). Beliefs that are not beneficial to most people can even become publicly entrenched “when backed up by expectations of enforcement that are confirmed when one deviates” (482). So, external pressures, including



enforcement, were most likely to have been involved in obtaining general acquiescence to publicly expressed beliefs and public participation in secret society rituals that were not beneficial for all.

Indeed, there are repeated references in all culture areas to the killing of doubters of secret society dogmas or those who mocked the spirits of the secret societies even if the doubters were the sons of chiefs. This indicates, first, that not everyone believed the ideological rhetoric promulgated in the community, and second, that acquiescence in outward behavior and expression was forced upon many community members if other means of persuasion were not effective. Contrary to many archaeologists' appeal to the power of beliefs in explaining monumental ritual architecture, we can only conclude that it was not the power of beliefs or superior ideologies, or even superior ritual experiences, that formed the basis of power in most ritual organizations, but simply the power to exact acquiescence for the ideological and other dictates of the leaders. As will be seen in the following chapters, this was manifestly the case with secret societies.

However, it must also be acknowledged that besides the non-believers and non-accepters, there was undoubtedly an equal number of people, if not more people, in all communities who accepted uncritically anything that self-proclaimed ritual specialists might claim. Such "gullible" people would have made it worth the effort to put on convincing ritual displays. Despite the ready support of the more gullible members of communities, doubters could not be tolerated as they could spread their doubts and counterclaims and thereby threaten the claims to authority and the power base of secret societies or elites. In order to intimidate any dissenters or doubters, those who ventured into secret society's areas or witnessed their activities, whether from curiosity or by accident, were typically killed, or if deemed desirable, were promptly initiated.

### *The Use of Terror and Human Sacrifice*

In view of these arguments, it becomes important to determine the extent to which terror was used by secret societies. This will be a particular focus in the following chapters. The term "terrorist" was used in these contexts long before it became a common descriptor in the twenty-first-century media. As part of terror-based strategies, the practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism (or minimally, the threat of these practices) will also be examined. Whether cannibalism was really employed in secret societies or not, or even in any traditional societies, has long been a sensitive issue with conflicting interpretations of the accounts. At least in some cases that will be described, there seems to have been little doubt as to the reality of the practices, but how common this was overall is still open to debate.



### *Roles in Emerging Complexity*

What role, if any, did secret societies play in creating more complex religious and political centers like Chavín de Huántar, the Puebloan great houses, Göbekli Tepe, and early state temples, as well as early state polities? This issue will be addressed further in Chapter 11.

### *Antiquity*

There is considerable discussion in the literature about the relatively recent adoption, or even origin, of secret societies by many groups on the American Northwest Coast and Northwest Interior as well as other locations like California, the American Southwest (e.g., Drucker 1941:227–9), and Great Lakes region (Weeks 2009, 2012). While some *specific* societies may have originated in the years immediately before or during European contact, it is usually acknowledged that some basic forms of secret society were “ancient” or of “considerable age” (Drucker 1941:229). Drucker suggested that the Dog Eating Society may represent an archaic form of secret society that was relatively widespread in much earlier times and probably included staged disappearances, supernatural tricks, whistles, and the use of cedar bark. Early or archaic forms of secret societies may have been replaced by more recent variants. Early origins are also consonant with archaeological evidence in the Northwest Interior and the Lower Fraser Valley (Hayden and Adams 2004; Morin 2010; Ritchie 2010; see Chapter 10). In the Southwest, Ware (2014:76) interpreted the archaeological evidence as indicating the existence of secret societies at least from the eighth century of the Common Era, if not before, while the ritual paraphernalia used by the Historic ‘Antap Society in southern California existed by 1000 BCE (Corbett 2004; Gamble 2008).

### *Identifying Secret Societies Archaeologically*

The antiquity of secret societies raises the issue of how they can be identified archaeologically. Therefore, a major focus of this book is on their material characteristics. There are a number of different archaeological indicators that can be used to identify secret societies, including special structures, locations, paraphernalia, burials, and evidence of sacrifices or cannibalism. However, given the material variability of ethnographic secret societies, no one criterion or set of criteria appears sufficient or necessary to identify them. It seems rather that archaeologists should use a polythetic and probabilistic approach to identifying the material remains of secret societies of the past. The more

material indicators that can be identified, the more probable a given case can be considered as representing a secret society. Even on the basis of ethnographic observations, it is still unclear as to whether they were present in Polynesia or among any of the complex hunter/gatherers in Australia.

### *How to Define Secret Societies or Variants*

Another issue that requires resolution is defining secret societies in more precise terms. As previously indicated, there are important gray areas in trying to distinguish between elaborate tribal initiation ceremonies, social or entertainment organizations, and secret societies. It is not always easy to identify critical distinguishing characteristics that satisfactorily separate these conceptual types of ritual or social organizations from hegemonic ritual sodalities based on secret knowledge.

### *Auxiliary Characteristics*

In addition to the issue of how secret societies should be defined ethnologically, an important issue for archaeologists is what practices and roles were common, if not universal, characteristics of these organizations, especially ones that might reveal important insights into the nature of these institutions or which might be used to identify secret societies archaeologically. These will be described in more detail in the following chapters and the archaeological implications will be more fully discussed in Chapter 10. However, a few are briefly mentioned here in order to emphasize their theoretical importance in subsequent chapters.

Initially, on the basis of her work in Taos pueblo, Brandt (1980:126–8) observed that a major consequence of secrecy within sodalities was the establishment of status hierarchies based on access to knowledge communicated only in oral form. She argued that oral transmission of knowledge was especially well suited to creating a high degree of control over information, hence the frequent opposition to the recording of that knowledge in written form (Brandt 1980:133–4). Brandt (1994:14) among others (Tefft 1980a, 1980b, 1980c; Wiessner 1996) argued that equality is always difficult to maintain, but that one effective technique for maintaining inequality is the use of secret information and surveillance.

There were also almost always impressive public displays and feasts hosted by such societies. As Wedgwood (1930:144) noted early on:

if the members of a secret association are to enjoy the sense of power and privilege, the acquisition of which was one of their reasons for becoming

members, they must, as it were, demonstrate their secrecy publicly. They must dance and parade through the village in their masks; they must make themselves felt as a force ... any ritual which they perform inevitably interrupts the routine existence of the whole village or district. The interruption ... has its unpleasant aspects, such as the beating of the uninitiated, the plundering of gardens, and the terrifying of women and children.

If secret societies were simply ritual associations for individuals who were extremely religious, such as monks, there would be no need for public displays. Ecstatic or other internal states could provide all the personal gratification necessary from such associations. That public displays – often associated with initiations, which were generally the most extravagant family expenditures in the lifetime of a household – were so prominent indicates that there was a major political or practical motivation behind the formation of secret societies. This is convenient for archaeologists since such public displays and feasts often – but not always – led to the construction of special structures or other facilities in which to hold these events (such as the Southwestern plazas or great kivas or the dance houses of Californian groups) in addition to the special paraphernalia and regalia required to impress spectators. Power animals were generally prominent in ideologies and displays. They served to symbolize and emphasize the power of secret societies. As part of the attempt to persuade spectators of members' supernatural and worldly powers, the public displays frequently included convincing demonstrations of power, both arcane and profane, such as staged putative supernatural abilities, and animal or human sacrifices. The elaborate and costly displays could provide a compelling pretext for requiring high initiation fees or contributions from community members to sustain the spiritual work of the organization.

In addition to the large public displays and facilities, the hierarchical organization of access to the ritual secrets of the organization often involved smaller, restricted, special ritual meeting places. In one of the few quasi-quantified estimates of the membership in such societies, only about 10 percent of the adults (Loeb 1926:365) were members of the *Kuksu* Societies in California, although in other cases it seems that the proportion could be higher (e.g., Gifford 1926:352–3).

The use of opulent ritual paraphernalia, costuming, and special foods is another frequent characteristic which underlines the self-interested political and economic motivations behind the formation of secret societies. Such materials were not required for ecstatic or other ritual experiences, as demonstrated by Australian Aboriginal initiations, monastic orders, ascetic hermits, and similar seekers of spiritual experiences. However, as Wedgwood (1930) argued, if

claims to supernatural power over the material world were to be credible for the general public, then some superior demonstration involving the material world had to be made. Displaying ritual objects and unusual costuming that originated in exotic, faraway, or unknown locations, or that required unusual skill to make, could be used as such convincing demonstrations. Similarly, providing foods that were out of the normal (such as the flesh of “power animals,” or even humans) could serve as demonstrations of unusual powers.

The important role of exotic materials and prestige items, including foods, could form unusual artifact assemblages which would be extremely helpful for archaeologists in identifying prehistoric examples of these organizations, although such use was not exclusive to them. Other political or kinship hierarchies also made good use of the same logic and strategies.

Secret societies generally also founded their claims to legitimacy on their ability to induce transcendent experiences, or *sacred ecstatic experiences* (SEEs), in initiates at various levels of advancement in their hierarchies. Such ecstatic personal experiences could validate claims of supernatural connections and were often associated with power animals and vision quests. The use of various techniques to induce altered states can sometimes be inferred archaeologically from the use of dark, sensory depriving environments or psychotropic materials, the presence of transformative iconographies, and the violation of taboos such as the eating of human flesh. Like initiations to gangster organizations or some college fraternities, physical and emotional ordeals also must have ensured loyalty to organizations and the maintenance of their secrets. As Bozeman (1976, cited in Tefft 1980b:53) emphasized, the costly proof of dedication to an organization and its ideology provided by these trials generally ensured members’ loyalties to the secret organizations and superseded their responsibilities to all other groups.

In order to fund both secret and public events (as well as to increase the economic power of the organization, or more specifically, its leaders), secret societies had to be able to obtain considerable surplus production from the community or at least from junior members and their supporters.

In order to emphasize the overriding importance and power of the secret society, beyond family, kinship, or community allegiances, especially powerful high-ranking members of such societies were sometimes given special burials in close proximity to secret society facilities or in remote locations rather than with their own kin or community.

Secret societies generally needed a security system to protect their secrets, including spies, agents who spread false information, individuals to mete out punishments, as well as the use of threats, terror, and demonstrations of unleashed (uncontrolled) supernatural powers that required the protection of secret society ritual knowledge to bring them under control (Tefft 1980a:15–16).

Finally, secret societies as a rule seem to have legitimized their spiritual claims to power by appropriating many of the pre-existing beliefs and ideological elements of their own cultures in order to make their claims more accepted (MacKenzie 1967:25). However, they typically added new levels of esoteric meaning to earlier religious beliefs, thereby transforming traditional ideologies into new systems using familiar symbols and concepts. Acceptance of, or acquiescence to, secret society ideological claims – especially among those who more easily accepted such claims – was important for facilitating hegemonic control within communities, and the adoption of parts of generally accepted ideologies and iconographies must have helped to achieve such acceptance.

#### HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

*The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* is primarily designed as a theoretical and ethnographic resource book. It provides data on secret societies organized so that people with specific interests can focus on the aspects of most importance to them. It does not necessarily have to be read from cover to cover, although the subject of secret societies can be so engaging that some readers may want to read everything. Chapters 2–9 present ethnographic observations from specific culture areas. The larger chapters have *Introduction* and *Overview* sections that provide a quick summary of the regional traditions and the most important observations. These should alert readers to topics of interest which they can consult in more detail in the following data sections of each chapter.

Culture areas were chosen on the basis of a generally acknowledged presence of secret societies in the areas and the richness of their documentation. Thus, the main chapters deal with the American Northwest Coast, California, the North American Southwest, Eastern and Plains North America, West and Central Africa, and Oceania. There are undoubtedly other locations where secret societies existed in pre-industrial communities, but the documentation is not always as rich or as available as the more classic cases from these culture areas. My main aim was to examine a good representative selection of secret societies rather than achieve an exhaustive coverage. Chapter 10 discusses potential archaeological examples of prehistoric secret societies, and Chapter 11 summarizes the issues and observations of previous chapters, including an exploration of the implications of secret societies for the development of more centralized political and religious organizations. For consistency, I have referred to all sources, observations, and activities in the past tense, even though some secret societies continue to exist today.

I have relied heavily on early ethnographic accounts of secret societies because such societies were often driven underground or out of existence by colonial and missionizing policies in the early periods of contact. Even

when they have managed to survive to modern times, secret societies have always been radically transformed by national policies, world economies, and missionary activities. We are exceptionally lucky to have the amazing accounts that were collected more than a century ago, sometimes at the cost of ethnographers' lives (e.g., Bernard Deacon). I hope readers appreciate the rare insights that these early accounts provide and that you find the observations on secret societies as fascinating as I have.



PART I

THE NEW WORLD





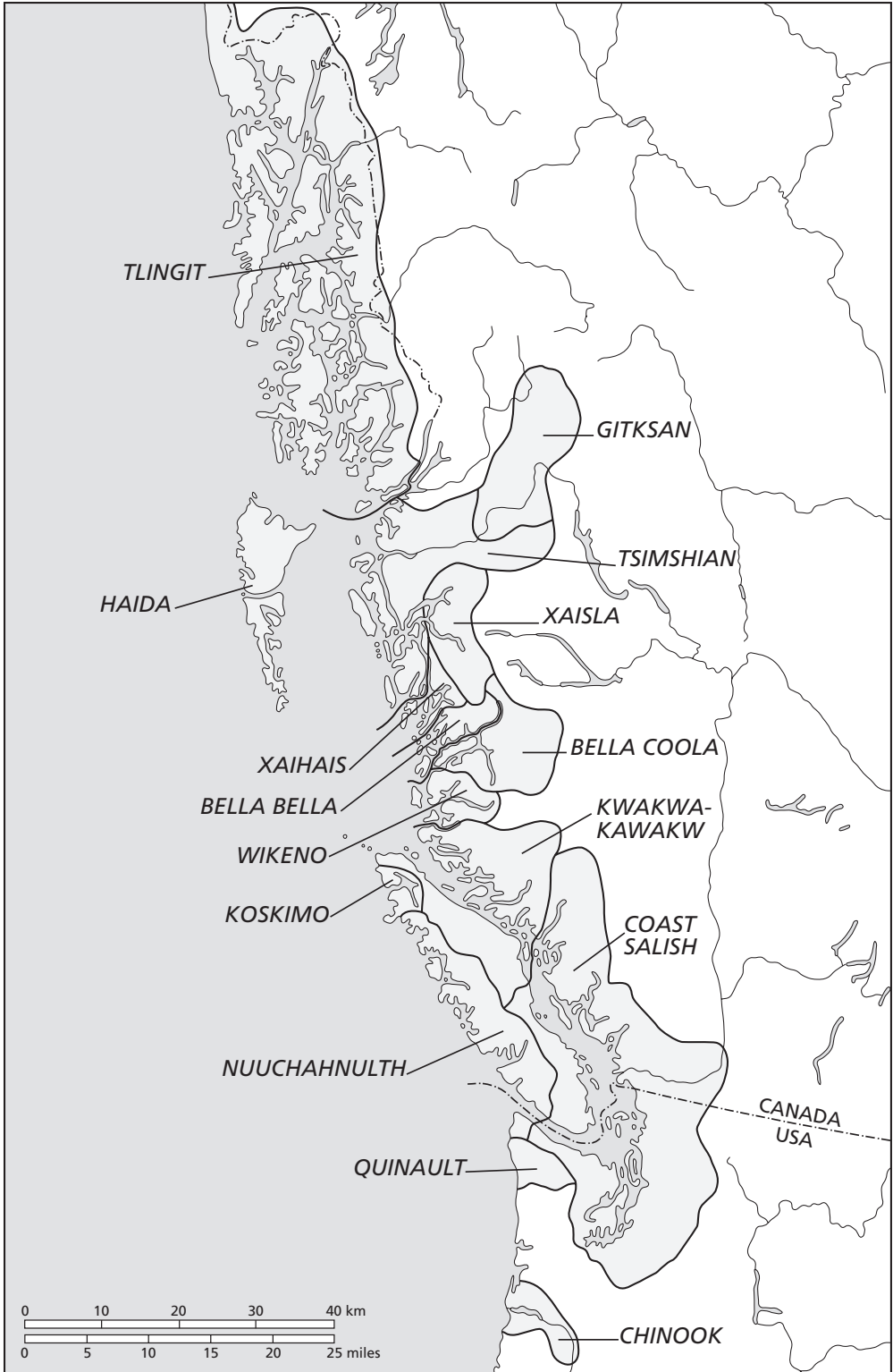
## CHAPTER TWO

# THE COMPLEX HUNTER/GATHERERS OF THE AMERICAN NORTHWEST

### INTRODUCTION

Above all, what is striking about the secret societies of the complex hunting and gathering cultures of the American Northwest Coast (Fig. 2.1) is the remarkable amount of time, effort, and expense that went into the rituals and performances. Although no reports deal with the amount of time required for the preparations, they must have taken many months, not counting the years of wealth accumulation required for initiation into the more important positions, the weeks or months of seclusion of the candidates, and the years of prohibitions after initiation. There were unusual materials to be procured; masks and elaborate costumes to be made; special dramatic or stage effects to be crafted or arranged (with confederates helping to make noise or other effects on house roofs, outside the houses, or even outside villages); feasts of the best foods to be procured, prepared, and organized; permissions from secret society “marshals” had to be obtained; gifts to be arranged; many songs and dances to be learned; and numerous meetings and rehearsals. The performances themselves usually lasted a number of days and often went on all night or could be repeated in each house of a village. According to McIlwraith (1948b:1), one host’s performance succeeded another so that there were dances on a nightly basis over the three months of the winter ceremonial season.

However, there were also considerable risks. McIlwraith, Drucker, and Boas all noted that deaths during long seclusion periods were not uncommon (see



2.1 Map of ethnic groups in the Pacific Northwest Coast referred to in Chapter 2.

“Ecstatic States”), besides which blunders during performances could entail punishments including death. Sponsors or hosts of the performances had to pay for everything, but they also had to obtain permission from secret society marshals or leaders, at least in some groups like the Bella Coola. It is often difficult to know to what extent the rapid breakdown of secret societies had altered their organizational structures by the time ethnographic observations were made. However, given all the costs, risks, and privations, one would expect there to be substantial benefits, at least traditionally, to membership in the secret societies and for sponsors of the elaborate performances. Yet, what these benefits were has not been meaningfully addressed by most ethnographers. We might anticipate that the prospect of acquiring substantial power and some means of accessing wealth was associated with memberships; however, details are elusive.

Boas (1897:661) stated that all the secret societies of the Northwest Coast were very similar, often even using the same names. They all used cedar bark as badges, including head rings, neck rings, and masks. Loeb (1929) saw the possession and mask characteristics as relatively “recent” influences from Siberian shamanism; however, this was speculative. The Tlingit appeared to represent the northern limit of secret society organizations (Boas 1897:275). They were present at Wrangell (Southern Tlingit), with some traces at Sitka, but not farther north (de Laguna 1972:628; Olson 1967:118), except possibly for Point Barrow Eskimos (see Chapter 6).

### *Similarities with California*

In general, there were many, sometimes striking, similarities between the central California *Kuksu* secret societies and the secret societies of the Northwest Coast. These included the themes of death and resurrection of new initiates; the disappearance of new initiates from the ritual gathering (sometimes ejected or thrown out) and a period of seclusion during which the initiate was supposed to have ascended to the upper realm of spirits from which he returned in a wild state and needed to be calmed (including by ritual dousing with water); portrayal of ghosts as either possessing people or as visiting the living (e.g., McIlwraith 1948b:6,211); the use of dances and disguises by performers to assume the role of, or to channel, specific spirits (Fig. 2.2); recognition or certification of successful initiation by publicly performing the dance received from spirits (e.g., McIlwraith 1948b:23); induced bleeding at the mouth as a sign of supernatural power or the possession by powerful spirits; the need of new initiates to cover their heads when temporarily leaving the ritual location (so as not to lose their spirit power – per McIlwraith 1948b:166); the high costs of initiations; the use of decorated staffs or sticks; the use of whistles and bullroarers as secret voices of spirits; the use of bone drinking tubes by new



2.2 Kwakwaka'wakw Wolf Society dancers in one of the residential long houses on the Northwest Coast, as depicted by Franz Boas (1897). Note the large central fire.

initiates; the use of stage magic to demonstrate supernatural powers to the uninitiated; and perhaps even a common derivation of the names for the cults or members, e.g., *Kuksu* in California and *KuKusiut* in Bella Coola.

There were several differences as well. Notably, the Northwest Coast secret societies involved distinctive possessions by the guardian spirits of each secret society and masks were used to personify those guardian spirits whereas these features do not occur in other areas (Loeb 1929:266,272–3). Possession only occurred in secret societies of the Northwest Coast, and is seen as a Siberian influence by Loeb (1929:266). Moreover, while groups in the Canadian Plateau and California used sweat houses, most groups in the Northwest Coast did not use them.

Because of the implications concerning the dynamics of secret societies and their interactions, several minor but striking features of some Northwest Coast secret societies held in common with those among the Ojibway are also of interest. These include the “shooting” of power into new initiates or others by means of special objects such as quartz crystals used by the Bella Coola and Nuuchahnulth (also known as the Nootka) or by cowrie shells used by the Ojibway. In both areas, the person “shot” fell down as if dead and was then revived. Some detailed similarities also exist between Northwest Coast groups and Plains groups such as the piercing of the skin on the back or arms or legs and the suspension of the individual(s) by ropes attached to items thrust through the skin (e.g., Boas 1897:482).

These detailed ritual similarities between groups separated by great distances may indicate that members of secret societies participated not only in regional interactions but more far-flung connections, creating an interacting network

of people who freely exchanged, bought, or borrowed elements of particular interest, introduced new practices to their own local groups, and promoted their adoption, much as described for Plains secret societies (Chapter 5). Individuals from other villages or regions in the Northwest were particularly welcome at secret society rituals, and special attempts were made to impress them, for example by conferring on them the exclusive honor of publicly receiving “potlatch” gifts (McIlwraith 1948b:28).

### *Origins*

Boas (1897:664) maintained that the origins of secret societies were closely connected with warfare. Ernst (1952:82) similarly thought that the Nuuchahnulth Wolf Society was originally warrior-based, noting that there was a strong warrior emphasis on Vancouver Island. Indeed, pronounced warrior aspects existed in many secret societies, including warrior dances and the destructive use of clubs in warrior spirit possession dances (Drucker 1941:202,205–6,214; Olson 1954:248). On the other hand, McIlwraith (1948b:266) thought that the *Kusiut* Society was originally a band of elders.

Tollefson (1976:154) argued that secret societies were not important among the Tlingit because they had such strong shamanic traditions and people went to shamans if they wanted supernatural power, negating the need to become involved collectively in a secret society to obtain such power.

## OVERVIEW

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

Ethnographers on the Northwest Coast rarely discuss motives behind forming or belonging to secret societies. However, when they do raise such issues they strongly emphasize the practical benefits, particularly obtaining power over other people and dominating society via the use of terror, violence, and black magic tactics (e.g., Drucker 1941:226). Secret societies have even been referred to as “terrorist organizations.” Since power appears to have been the goal of membership, and a frequently attained one, competition for positions was frequently intense, resulting in a very fluid and dynamic ritual structure with new dances and entire ritual organizations being constantly introduced with only the most successful persisting or flourishing. This is a recurring characteristic of secret societies in most regions of the globe.

### **Wealth Acquisition**

There is little information on how members, especially high-ranking members, benefited materially from their positions other than from initiation or advancement payments. There are a number of allusions to candidate families hosting feasts as payments to the members of secret societies. Those who transgressed society rules could be killed or forced to provide feasts to secret society members. There were unspecified “compensations” paid to society members for training, passing power, and returning spirit-possessed individuals back to normal states. Some members also claimed to steal the souls of spectators which could be returned to the rightful owner upon payment. “Shamans” similarly were said to make people sick so that they could extract high prices for the cures.

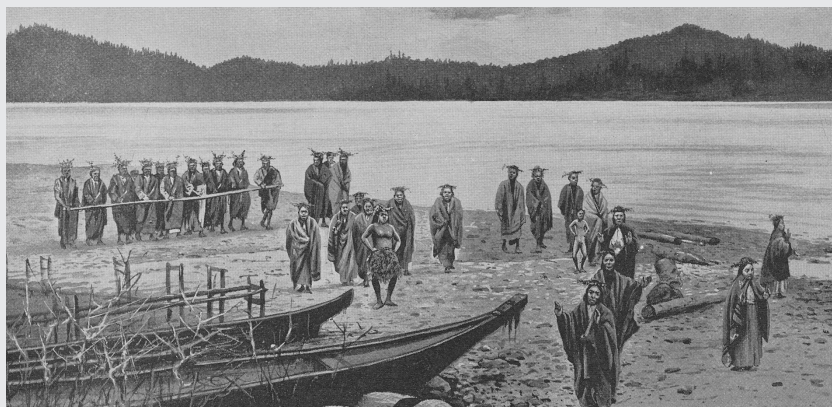
### **Relation to Politics**

There was a strong relationship between chiefly offices and the most important, highest ranked secret societies, or, in some cases, the highest positions in secret societies. Some societies such as the *Sisauk* Society only admitted “chiefs” (the heads of corporate kin groups) and their power was said to derive from their membership in the *Sisauk* Society.

### *Tactics*

### **Ideology**

In order to justify the use of terror and violence, secret societies promulgated a number of key ideological premises. These included the existence of members’ ancestors who acquired supernatural powers from spirits which could be passed on to descendants or acquired anew directly from spirits. These powers could be accessed in winter ceremonial times via dances, wearing masks, singing, rituals and special paraphernalia resulting in the possession of members by their ancestral spirits – which were subsequently exorcised by other members. Supernatural power was portrayed as dangerous and hence required special training to safely control. In order to emphasize their supernatural powers, secret society members often referred to themselves as shamans, whether they had shamanistic abilities or not. Those undergoing initiation were said to die and travel to the spirit realm where they became spirits and returned in a new form (Fig. 2.3). The societies claimed that they could bring the dead back to life, at least in some cases. The development of skills and success in all domains was supposed to be dependent on supernatural help which, in turn, was dependent on wealth. Conversely, wealth was



2.3 Depiction by Franz Boas (1897) of a new *Hamatsa* initiate (the central figure with bare torso and cedar bough skirt) on the Northwest Coast returning from his sojourn with ethereal powers and landing on earth on the beach. Note the women involved in the procession as well as the young naked boy with the same stance to the right of the initiate. He may also have been given some status within the secret society.

a sign of supernatural favor. Because of such warrants, powerful chiefs could make their own rules and disregard conventional practices.

### Community Benefits and Threats

While the more public secret society ceremonies certainly provided entertainment for their communities, it is difficult to find many references to other community benefits aside from occasional mentions of empowering warriors or healing, and even these last could be suspect as sickness was sometimes said to have been induced by secret society members in order to get high commissions for healings. The overwhelming emphasis in the ethnographies is on the dire consequences of ignoring or unleashing the supernatural powers dealt with by the secret societies, as palpably demonstrated by the violent acts of masked spirits and the cannibalistic manias of people who were possessed by spirits. Houses could be destroyed, dogs torn apart, people bitten by those possessed, and such spirits could take possession of initiates for any perceived slight at any time.

### Esoteric Knowledge

It was the secret societies that claimed to hold the knowledge of how to control the terrible power of the spirits. Others who tried to do so were said to go insane, sicken, or often die.

### Exclusiveness, Costs, and Hierarchies

While there were some secret societies of lesser importance which admitted a wide range of members, the more important secret societies were very exclusive and used the criteria of wealth, descent, and



sociopolitical position to exclude non-members. In some cases such as the *Nuuchahnulth* Wolf Society, all males were expected to become non-members at the entry level of the society. (A number of variant names are given for the *Nuuchahnulth* Wolf Society, e.g., *Klukwalle* (Ernst 1952:2, 19), *Tlokoala* (Boas 1891:599); see Ernst (1952:2) for a comprehensive list.) However, there were a number of ranked specialized positions within these societies which constituted a kind of separate society. These positions were much more exclusive. A number of Northwest Coast societies, especially the *Hamatsa* (Cannibal) groups, were exclusively for wealthy chiefs or elites. The initiation feasts in some groups constituted the greatest undertaking of a man's career. Initiation costs could be enormous and sometimes entailed many thousands of blankets, as well as bracelets, decorated boxes, food, kitchen ware, canoes, pelts, shells, masks, and other wealth items, in one case enough to fill a square that was 100 feet on a side. The higher one progressed in the ranked positions of the secret societies, the more costly and exclusive the initiations became.

### **Public Displays**

In order to persuade community members of the power of the supernatural forces that secret societies claimed to control, they periodically put on dances, displays, and processions of some of those powers for everyone to see. Society members impersonated spirits by the use of masks, costumes, and unusual noise-making devices. They also developed highly sophisticated stage magic techniques, all of which provided fascination and entertainment for non-initiated spectators, as well as instilling terror. Thus, spectators witnessed dancers becoming crazy and possessed, going around biting bits of flesh from people, or tearing dogs apart and eating them. Some of those who were possessed destroyed house walls and furniture. Some could handle fire, keep burning coals in their mouths, make rattles dance by themselves, change water to blood, bring dead salmon to life, have arrows thrust through their bodies. Some initiates even cut off their own heads only to be brought back to life. The material power (derived from spirit power) of the society was also manifested in the form of lavish feasts, spirit costumes and masks, and the destruction of property such as the burning of fish oil and killing of slaves.

### **Ecstatic States**

There can be little doubt that at least some of the initiations and dances created altered ecstatic states of consciousness for individuals. The lengthy periods of fasting resulting in emaciated initiates, and the days of drumming, drone-style singing, dancing, and the psychological stresses of confronting or even eating corpses all must have had mind-altering

effects. These trials were so severe that candidates sometimes died during their ordeals. The effects of entering such altered states would have created more convincing performances for spectators, but also would have persuaded some of those who experienced possession states of the reality of the spirit powers, thus binding them more strongly to secret society organizations and leaders.

### **Enforcement**

If uninitiated spectators failed to be awed or suitably fearful of the ideological claims and spirit performances, secret societies generally resorted to coercion and violence to achieve acquiescence from all community members. Those who did not accept secret society claims or dictates were targeted and frequently eliminated one way or another. Some groups employed spies to identify such individuals. Thus, as tends to be true of many secret societies, anyone disclosing or discovering that the appearances of the spirits were really humans in masks, or anyone disclosing the tricks behind stage magic performances, was either inducted into the society (if deemed desirable) or killed outright. This was the common procedure for dealing with individuals who entered – either on purpose or accidentally – designated sacred spaces of the society. Punishments were also meted out to society members who revealed secrets, or to those who let their masks fall in performances, or who made staged displays that failed to work. Killings for transgressions of conduct rules during dances became prevalent in some groups. Lesser offences such as coughing, talking, or laughing during dances could be punished by clubbing, knife jabs, disfigurement, or fines (Fig. 2.4). Above all, it was the use of violence in these situations and in states of possession which warranted the use of the terms “terrorist” and “terror” to describe the organizations and their tactics.

### **Sacrifices and Cannibalism**

While the sacrifice of slaves during potlatches and secret society performances seems to be generally accepted as an aspect of some Northwest Coast ceremonialism, the issue of cannibalism is strongly debated. There are numerous claims of first-hand accounts, and there appear to have been desiccated corpses involved in ceremonies, but it cannot be known whether human flesh was actually consumed, or perhaps only touched to the mouth, or whether stage illusions were used to make it seem as though cannibalism was occurring in order to intimidate spectators or to establish fearsome reputations. In other parts of the world such as Melanesia and Africa, secret societies were more certainly using cannibalism as a means to intimidate any who opposed them (see



2.4 Kwakiutl *Hamatsa* members who acted as enforcers (*Noonlemala*) of society rules (Boas 1897). Note the cedar bark ring worn by the central figure as a sign of initiation, and probably the director of the group.

Chapters 8 and 9). Thus, this may have been a tactic used by a range of secret societies both ethnographically and prehistorically, including on the Northwest Coast.

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia and Structures**

A broad array of ritual paraphernalia was used by Northwest Coast secret societies. In general, these included masks, various forms of wood whistles, bullroarers, drums, rattles, rattling aprons, bird bone drinking tubes, horns, trumpets, smoking pipes, bark rings, certain bird skins or animal pelts, decorated staffs and poles, copper nails for scratching, quartz crystals, and some special stones.

The general ritual settlement pattern was to hold initiation and other important ceremonies inside a house in the community which was appropriated for the purpose, suitably rearranged, and cordoned off. Special meeting places were also established at varying distances, from 150 to 400 meters, outside the villages, although no structures are reported to have been built at such locations. Ritual paraphernalia was sometimes stored in “faraway” locations, including rock shelters and caves.

Candidates for initiations were taken to secluded locations outside the villages where they camped for the duration of their seclusion, probably not too distant from villages. Caves are mentioned in some areas as being used for seclusion, meetings, or ritual storage locations of secret societies. There are thus both central (village) loci of secret society activities and a variety of remote (non-village) loci for society activities. The use of caves is of particular note given their archaeological importance and frequent evidence of ritual use.

### **Burials**

Information on the burial of high-ranking secret society members is very limited, perhaps because such individuals were generally chiefs, and chiefly burials are usually described in terms of the sociopolitical roles that the deceased held, reflected in the sculptures on their burial poles. Thus, in the case of the Northwest Coast, it is difficult to distinguish any unique features of burials of secret society members. Kamenskii (1985:78) does report that shamans were buried in caves, but whether he was referring to bona fide shamans or secret society members referred to as shamans is uncertain.

### **Cross-cutting Kinship or Regional Organizations, and Art Styles**

Since many specific roles and dances in secret societies could only be occupied or performed by members of specific descent groups, this guaranteed that a variety of descent groups would be represented in the membership of specific secret societies. Secret society membership therefore cross-cut kinship groups in communities. In addition to serving as an overarching organization for the wider community, there is ample evidence that major secret society ceremonies included members of neighboring villages or even of larger regions. In the Bella Coola region, secret society members in one village could even intervene in another village's affairs to punish ritual transgressions. The marking of initiates with scars or other physical modifications may have been used to reliably identify initiates when they visited groups where they were unknown.

Given such mutual participation in secret society rituals on a regional scale, it is not surprising that the masks and other ritual paraphernalia (rattles, staffs, feasting dishes) exhibit artistic similarities generally known as the Northwest Coast art style with regional substyles (e.g., *Kwakwaka'wakw* (also known as the Kwakiutl), *Salish*, *Nuuchahnulth* (also known as the Nootka), *Tlingit*, *Bella Coola*, *Tsimshian*). These ritual and artistic similarities can be considered as expressions of a Northwest Coast Interaction Sphere. In addition to common secret society ritual origins,



2.5 A bear head used as a patron in Bella Coola rituals and made to act life-like during ceremonies (McIlwraith 1949b:Plate 5).

these similarities also undoubtedly emerged from common feasting and political structures.

### **Power Animals**

One of the features of these common ritual practices was an emphasis on certain animals as sources of great power. These included bears in particular (Fig. 2.5), but also wolves, various birds (especially ravens and eagles), mythical animals such as sea monsters (especially the *sisiutl* and thunderbirds), and killer whales.

### **Number of Societies and Proportion of Population**

While some communities may have had only a single secret society organization, the more common pattern seems to have been for communities to have from two to five such organizations. As previously noted, some societies were exclusively for chiefs and thus must have involved only a small segment of the population. Other societies had up to forty-four or fifty-three individual dance roles, but it is not clear whether this was for a single village or whether it was for the regional organization. Some societies like the *Nuuchahnulth* Wolf Society were for all free male residents of villages at the entry level, although the upper ranks only involved small numbers of people.

### **Sex and Age**

Women could be initiated into at least some secret societies. They could perform dances in some societies, but only held supporting roles in others. There were also societies that excluded women or had exclusively female members.

Children were commonly initiated into many secret societies around the age of seven to ten years old. However, cases of three-year-old initiates were also reported.

### **Feasts**

There were numerous feasts associated with secret society initiations and performances, even on a nightly basis for the duration of the ritual season. There were particularly grandiose feasts at the culmination of sons' initiations into the most important societies, described as the greatest potlatch of a man's career (Boas 1897:205,208). Other feasts were given to secret society members for services, as fines for transgressions, and for various initiation arrangements.

### **Frequency**

Important secret society dances and rituals were held every year during the winter ritual season. Initiations into the highest ranks must have been much less frequent since it took about twelve years to enter the third level of the Cannibal society.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

In addition to their ideological claims, Drucker (1941:226) categorically states that the function of secret societies on the Northwest Coast was to dominate society by the use of violence or black magic. Accounts of some informants portrayed them as "terroristic organizations" (Drucker 1941:226). Members of secret societies were reported to experience powerful feelings of superiority over non-members (McIlwraith 1948b:257). Ruyle (1973:617), too, argued that the monopolization of supernatural power by the ruling class supported the exploitative system by producing fear, awe, and acquiescence on the part of the uninitiated populace. In discussing the Gitksan, John Adams (1973:115) makes the important point that for those at the head of kinship groups, there was no way within the kinship system to increase wealth or power. In order to do this, ambitious individuals had to go outside kinship groups to create war or other alliances or to establish secret dance societies.

In general, Boas (1897:638) painted a very dynamic picture of secret society formation and evolution, showing that new dances were constantly being introduced, with some of the better ones lasting, while many faded away. Similarly, Olson (1967:67–8) observed that "new" dances (not necessarily secret society dances, but probably displaying similar dynamics) were



considered great things and were often obtained from neighboring tribes by the Tlingit, namely from the Tsimshian, the Tahltan, and other Interior groups. Boas also observed that ceremonies that became too elaborate and expensive were abandoned for newer ones (1897:644), and that people who wanted to obtain the advantages and prerogatives that the secret societies could confer either had to join existing secret societies or start new ones (Boas 1897:663).

Although the specific historical societies of the nineteenth century such as those with cannibal aspects seem to have spread widely along the coast in recent times (sixty to seventy years prior to Boas' work), Boas (1897:661) argued that other forms of secret societies probably existed earlier. Thus, as elsewhere (the Plains, New Guinea, the Southwest, California), specific successful secret societies exhibited the ability to spread over large regions very rapidly, creating a relatively uniform regional network of ritual and political organizations that would otherwise be unexpected and surprising. In fact, Boas (1897) stated that all the secret societies of the Northwest Coast were very similar, often even using the same names. They all used cedar bark as badges, including head rings, neck rings, and masks. I postulate that the same dynamic probably underlay the emergence of regional ritual phenomena such as the Chavín Horizon, the Chaco Canyon culture, the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, or other similar pre-historic manifestations.

### **Wealth Acquisition (see also "Membership Fees")**

Little is written about how secret societies obtained material benefits. Certainly, the many feasts that the initiates' families were required to give to the members of the secret societies (as documented by Drucker 1941) were major types of payments. The required training of initiates also necessitated payments, as did all instances of returning initiates back to normal states so that they were no longer a danger to the community (Drucker 1941). Initiation fees for Nuuchahnulth novices were given to chiefs who distributed the wealth items among society members (Boas 1897:632). Anyone who coughed or laughed during Kwakwakawakw ceremonies was required to give secret society members a feast (Boas 1897:507,526).

Halpin (1984:283–4) says that Tsimshian chiefs in secret societies were richly compensated for their passing of power to novices. The form of "payments" is far less specific, although the surrender of wealth for the transfer of dances, songs, prayers, or paraphernalia is plausible. The cost of advancement into successive ranks escalated in tandem with rank level. While the individual initiate may have personally financed some of these costs as he matured, it is more likely that, as a member of a high-ranking administrative family in a corporate group, he drew upon his entire family, and probably his entire house group or kin group to provide the necessary initiation payments. In this fashion, secret

societies could draw off substantial portions of the surplus production of a large section of a community.

Bella Coola and probably other secret society performers sometimes could attract and ensnare the spirit or soul of uninitiated spectators, who then had to pay to have their spirit returned to them (McIlwraith 1948b:5,63). Similarly, Kwakwakawakw spectators who had their souls stolen by dancers had to pay to have them returned (Boas 1897:561,577). In general, secret society members were thought to cause or promote sickness in their communities so that people would have to come to the society to be cured, and had to pay the “shaman” handsomely. This was viewed by the afflicted individuals as extortion (Boas 1897:197,580,744; Drucker 1941:226fn76,227). Thus, successful secret society “shaman” curers were always wealthy (Boas 1897:197,580,744; Cove and MacDonald 1987:116,129).

### **Political Connections**

The power of Bella Coola chiefs was said to derive from the performance of dances that they controlled in the *Sisauk* Society composed exclusively of chiefs (Barker and Cole 2003:63–4). Chiefs were also the exclusive members of the Cannibal and other societies in many groups or were the heads of secret societies as among the Nuuchahnulth, Quinault, and Chinook (see “Exclusiveness and Ranking”).

### *Tactics*

### **Ideology and Control of Esoteric Knowledge**

Central to Northwest Coast secret society ideologies were putative ancestral contacts with supernatural beings who conveyed supernatural powers to specific ancestors who, in turn, made them available to those of their descendants who wanted those powers and were able to acquire them through memberships in secret societies. This required considerable wealth payments as well as family connections. In the conceptual schemes of secret societies, these supernatural powers could be accessed via initiations (involving fasting and physical-psychological ordeals), dancing and singing, donning masks and costumes, and using ritual paraphernalia. Members were said to become possessed by the spirits, or even to become the spirits (see “Ideology and Control of Esoteric Knowledge”). For instance, Kwakwakawakw dances were claimed to be inherited from the mythic encounter of an ancestor with a supernatural being that conferred power on the ancestor which subsequently could be passed on to one of his descendants (Drucker 1941:202). McIlwraith (1948a:238–40) observed that the Bella Coola *Sisauk* Society claimed to have very powerful supernatural connections which apparently increased with repeated initiations (up to ten times).

Among the Kwakwakawakw and Tsimshian – and probably other Northwest Coastal groups as well as Southwestern groups – the right to control economic



resources, like the right to access specific supernatural spirits, was hereditary, with powers and privileges stemming largely from the exclusive elite hereditary rights and roles in secret societies (Drucker 1941:59; Adams 1973; Cove and MacDonald 1987:38; Wolf 1999:90). Exclusive access to supernatural knowledge and power was used as a warrant for the exercise of specific practical skills, and the differential wielding of secular power and authority. Tsimshian chiefs claimed that only they had the power to deal directly with heavenly beings, whereas such contact would make others go insane or make them sick (Halpin 1984:286).

Typical of many transegalitarian societies, material wealth and positions of power were portrayed among the Gitksan, the Bella Coola, and probably most other groups as resulting from spiritual favor obtained through the performance of special rituals and feasts (Adams 1973:119; Barker and Cole 2003:164). A more extreme expression of this ideology was promulgated among the Bella Coola, some of whom maintained that humans could not do anything without supernatural help. Therefore sacrifices, prayers, and abstinence were needed for all important endeavors, perhaps to promote or justify an ideology of privilege since it was maintained that in order to use those skills, they had to be validated, typically at potlatches – hence rich families had many “skills” while the poor had few or none in this ideological system (McIlwraith 1948a:57,104,110,261).

Power was portrayed as a gift from the spirits in recognition of an individual’s strong supernatural character and/or the ritual observances of an individual (McIlwraith 1948a:522). The supernatural power held by “shamans” was claimed to be particularly dangerous to others and was sometimes even portrayed as a spirit residing in the body of a shaman (573,576). This presumably also applied to secret society members since shamans were generally members of secret societies and the same term (*Kusiut*) was used to refer to both a shaman and a secret society member (547,565). However, in contravention of all norms, powerful chiefs “feared no restrictions and heeded no conventions” (489), and undoubtedly justified their actions in terms of their positions in the *Sisauk* Society. Such actions and attitudes are characteristic of extreme aggrandizer, if not sociopathic, behavior (Hare 1993).

In the ideology of the secret society, initiates went to the upper world to obtain supernatural knowledge and in some sense became supernatural beings. Boas (1900:118) added that initiates in the Bella Coola Cannibal Society took human flesh with them to eat on these celestial journeys, for which a slave was killed. However, supernatural power could also be transferred from one individual to another by means of “shooting” a crystal into the person who fainted or was “killed” by the shock of the power, but then was revived and eventually returned to a normal state by removing the crystal from his body. Supernatural power was portrayed as dangerous (rather like electricity or nuclear power), although secret society members knew how to get it and use it

without harming themselves (McIlwraith 1948b:4,36,74,80–1,165,247–8,251–2). According to Garfield and Wingert (1977:41), “recipients of secret society power were dangerous to all who had not been initiated by the same spirits.” At the time of European contact, the power held by secret society members was apparently unquestioned (McIlwraith 1948b:10).

In order to emphasize the supernatural abilities of initiates, members of at least the most important secret societies adopted the title of shaman, apparently irrespective of their shamanic skills, not too dissimilar to the training of priests in seminaries. Among the Wikeno Kwakwakawakw, all the initiates and dancers in the shamans’ series of dances were called “shamans” (Drucker 1941:202). The same appears to have been true among the Nuuchahnulth (Boas 1897:632). The Xaihais Kwakwakawakw distinguished between those called shamans by dint of membership in secret societies and “true shamans” (Boas 1897:214). Among the Kwakwakawakw at Fort Rupert, Curtis categorized people as either uninitiated or “shamans” (initiates) (Touchie 2010:103). Similarly, Boas (1891:599) reported that those who were not initiated into the Wolf Society were referred to as “not being shamans,” while new members were initiated in the context of ceremonies and feasts referred to as the “Shamans’ Dance” (Kenyon 1980:30).

In addition to bearing the epithet of “shaman,” Bella Coola initiates also wore a distinctive collar used by shamans (McIlwraith 1948b:11). Tsimshian chiefs often incorporated references to “heaven” in their names, referring to the source of their power, and engaged in rival demonstrations to display their superior supernatural power.

### **Benefits and Threats to Community Well-being**

A major benefit that secret societies claimed to provide to their communities was protection from dangerous supernatural powers which secret societies themselves periodically unleashed in communities to demonstrate how much danger the community might face without their protection. McIlwraith (1948b:58,71–90) observed that the Cannibal Societies of the Bella Coola not only commanded the most awe, but instilled fear and terror in non-members. Manifestations of non-human behavior inherited from ancestors and evoked by Kwakwakawakw possession dances included the raw uncontrolled power of supernatural entities that wreaked havoc in the material and social world via their possessed human agents. Demonstrations of this raw power involved the possessed person destroying property, tearing off people’s clothes, biting people, and cannibalism. Cannibal-possessed people ran through all the houses of the village biting various individuals, even those of high rank (Boas 1897:437,440–3,528,531,635,651–6; Drucker 1941:202,213,216) or took “pieces of flesh out of the arms and chest of the people” (Boas 1897:437). It was said that if the *Hamatsa* (cannibal) spirits could not be pacified (by dances and



2.6 A diorama of a new *Hamatsa* initiate emerging from a ritual house screen, still possessed by the cannibal spirit. Note the roles of the women in the proceedings and the cedar bark rings worn by other members, indicating that they had control over the cannibal spirit (Boas 1897).

songs), then there would always be trouble (Boas 1897:573,616). People who suffered injuries from such acts had to be compensated. The cannibals could become excited at any time if provoked by any perceived slight, the mention of certain topics, mistakes in rituals, or improper actions (Boas 1897:214,557; Olson 1954:242; Garfield and Wingert 1977:41), thus posing a constant threat to individuals and the community (Fig. 2.6).

Members of other secret societies like the Fire Throwers and Destroyers could similarly wreak havoc (typically destroying almost anything in their frenzies and biting off pieces of flesh from women's arms – all of whom had to be compensated), and they regularly did so when they contacted sacred powers, only to be brought under control by the higher ranking members with the secret knowledge to control supernatural forces (Halpin 1984:283–4,286,289–90). This was similar to the Panther dancers among the Nuuchahnulth described by Boas (1891:603) who knocked everything to pieces, poured water on fires, tore dogs apart and devoured them. McIlwraith (1948b:58,71–90,107,118,127) repeatedly mentions the terror that such events created throughout the entire village, especially for the uninitiated who often cowered in their houses or rooms while destruction rained down on their houses or persons from “Cannibals,” “Breakers,” “Scratchers,” “Bears,” “Wolves,” and other supernatural impersonators. As previously noted, other dancers claimed to capture

or steal the souls of spectators (Boas 1897:561,577; McIlwraith 1948b:5,63). Similarly, individuals being initiated into spirit dancing among the Coast Salish Sto:lo were considered dangerous, having unregulated power capable of harming others, whereas secret society members had the knowledge to control such individuals (Jilek and Jilek-Aall 2000:5).

Among the central Kwakwakawakw, some of the most important claimed powers were the ability to heal or cause sickness or death (Drucker 1941:203) as well as the power to capture the souls of audience members and return them (Boas 1897:561,577). The Nuuchahnulth had a secret society, largely composed of women, that specialized in curing (Boas 1897:643) and this may be the same as the *Tsaiyeq* Society described by Drucker (1951:217). The Quinault also had a secret society that was primarily for curing and whose members were primarily women (Olson 1936:122). However, members of their main society, the *Klokwalke* (Wolf) Society, were feared and reputed to kill and eat people during their secret ceremonies (Olson 1936:121).

One community benefit of some secret society dances that included volleys of rifle fire was that they could be used to strengthen warriors' military spirits, excite them to go into battles, and presumably be more fearsome and effective warriors (Boas 1897:577,641). As another community benefit, at least one dance, the Mother Nature Dance, of the Bella Coola was portrayed as creating or promoting the birth of plant life (McIlwraith 1948b:196).

### **Exclusiveness and Ranking**

In general, Drucker (1941:225; see also Ford 1968:24) noted that on the Northwest Coast, the highest ranking chiefs owned the highest ranked dances with the most ceremonial prerogatives. Low-ranked individuals were generally not members of secret societies and could not even participate in potlatches following dances.

Among the Tsimshian, "supernatural contacts were determined by hereditary status ... only persons who had wealth could advance in the ranks of the secret societies" (Garfield and Wingert 1977:46). Only elites were members of the exclusive Fire Thrower, Destroyers, and Cannibal societies (Halpin 1984:283-4). Expensive secret dance societies excluded non-elite Gitksans, according to John Adams (1973:113).

Kwakwakawakw individuals had to have both a hereditary claim or affinal link (to be able to acquire dances) and enough family resource-ability to underwrite the training, displays, gifts, and impressive feasts required for initiation (Boas 1897; Codere 1950:6; Spradley 1969:82; see "Cross-cutting Kinship"). The *Hamatsa* members, in particular, were "men in the highest positions in all the tribes" (Spradley 1969:82). Thus, political and social positions of rank, hierarchical descent, and succession were all related to ceremonial titles and privileges (Wolf 1999:82). Dances were ranked, with only the highest ranked

chiefs eligible to enter the Cannibal Society among the Bella Bella (Drucker 1941:202,205,208,216).

There was also a series of specialized roles in secret societies which were probably ranked. In addition to the numerous dance roles that were inherited and owned, Kwakwakawakw secret societies had masters of ceremonies; dance masters; caretakers for drums, batons, and eagle down; door guardians; tally keepers; distributors of gifts; people designated to be bitten; dish carriers; and undoubtedly many other offices (e.g., fire tenders, assistants, messengers) (Boas 1897:431,541,613,629). McIlwraith (1948a:27,44; 1948b:44,50) also reported that some members of the Bella Coola *Kusiut* Society were calendar specialists who engaged in bitter disputes for ceremonies just as their supernatural counterparts “argue about their observations after the fashion of humans.” Other specialized roles included keeping track of debts which required training and involved the use of sticks to keep accounts (McIlwraith 1948a:228). McIlwraith also mentioned carvers, heralds, singers, dancers, marshals, and spies in various accounts.

The *Sisauk* Society of the Bella Coola was explicitly viewed as an exclusive society of chiefs. Only children or families of wealthy chiefs could be members (McIlwraith 1948a:180–1) and membership gave individuals a warrant for control over a territory derived from their confirmation of ancestral power (Kramer 2006:80). The power of Bella Coola chiefs was said to derive from the performance of dances that they controlled in the *Sisauk* Society (presented in terms of their mythical ancestral heritage). Dances had to be validated by distributing costly gifts (Barker and Cole 2003:63–4). Similarly, an ancestral prerogative was required for entering the *Kusiut* Society, and the leading roles of “marshals” were hereditary (McIlwraith 1948b:16). Permission had to be obtained from the marshals of the society for all performances and “tricks” to be used. In concert, these officials approved new initiates, oversaw preparations for ceremonies, policed behavior, ensured that the dignity of the society was maintained, and decided on punishments (16,24,68,114,124,128–9,150). Their names reflected power roles (e.g., “Destroyer,” “The Terrifier,” “Dog-Tooth,” and “Ritual Guardian Who Grips with His Teeth”; 16–17). Aside from the role of marshals, there were other specialized roles, and dances were ranked in importance (123).

For the Tsimshian the cost of initiations into successive ranks escalated in tandem with rank level, thus creating very exclusive upper ranks (Halpin 1984:283–4). Among the Nuuchahnulth, chiefs headed the Wolf (*Lokoala*) Society while only rich individuals became members of Coast Salish secret societies (Boas 1897:632,645). Chiefs led the secret society of the Quinault and members had to be wealthy (Olson 1936:121; Skoggard 2001:6). Members of Chinookan secret societies were also from the upper class (Ray 1938:89–90).



## Membership Fees

Membership and advancement fees were explicitly used to restrict membership, especially in the upper ranks. Among most groups examined by Drucker (1941:207–8,209,211,212–15,217,218,219–23) fees included a series of feasts or potlatches given by the initiate's family and supporters to secret society members, or at least the higher ranking members, culminating in a large, expensive public celebratory feast. For the initiation of a chief's son, a full year was required to assemble the necessary materials (Drucker 1941:214). The Nuuchahnulth only held the Wolf (*Lokoala*) ceremony when an individual could give "a large amount of property" for an initiation (Boas 1897:633). This wealth was given to the head of the secret society who distributed it to the members at a great feast (Boas 1891:599).

The total cost of the initiations into some of the Wikeno societies was very expensive, and the major potlatch given by high-ranking individuals at the culmination of a son's initiation was usually the greatest of a man's career (Boas 1897:205,208; Olson 1954:243,249). Full entry into the third level of the Cannibal Society took twelve years and required a great deal of wealth, with few men able to achieve this rank. The Heavenly series of dances of the Wikeno Kwakwakawakw were even more costly (Olson 1954:205,213). Boas (1897:556) provided a partial list of items given away for initiating one man's son as a *Hamatsa*, apparently not including the various feasting and potlatch costs. These appear to have been three coppers worth 3,400 blankets in all, plus a large number of blankets given to guests, including two button blankets. Elsewhere, Boas (1897:471,501) emphasized that initiations involved immense wealth distributions, especially for *Hamatsa* initiation, which was "exceedingly expensive." When a secret society dance was transferred from one Kwakwakawakw mother's kin group to her son, a square 100 feet on a side was demarcated on the beach and filled with food dishes, pots, cutlery, bracelets, boxes, blankets, copper, canoes, sea otter pelts, slaves, and other wealth items to be given away (Boas 1897:422,471). The main wealth items that Kane (1996:165–6) mentioned were slaves, otter furs, dentalia, and wives. Initiations were one of the few events in which wealth was purposefully destroyed (Boas 1897:357). Spradley (1969:92) also emphasized the excessive costs of initiations and feasts, listing gold bracelets and broaches as given to guest chiefs from other villages in addition to copious amounts of money, clothes, blankets, dishes, pots, and other items given to helpers. Boas (1897:542) mentioned that at one initiation, women and children were given coppers, bracelets, and spoons, while men received silver bracelets, kettles, and box covers. At another initiation, 13,200 blankets were given away as well as 250 button blankets, 270 silver bracelets, 7,000 brass bracelets, 240 wash basins, and large quantities of spoons, abalone shells, masks, and kettles (Boas 1897:622–9).

Initiation into the Bella Coola *Sisauk* Society was similarly expensive, although actual amounts of goods are not reported by McIlwraith (1948a:198,203–5,207,238–9) who only said that gifts were given to the village and “foreign guests” who received potlatching valuables. He also stated that paying for people to care for initiates in seclusion was a high expense, and that chiefs’ sons could undergo repeated initiations (up to ten times) to increase their prestige in the society, with high costs each time. Costs were in the form of skins, blankets, food, boxes, baskets, slaves, canoes, and unspecified other items (McIlwraith 1948a:203–5).

Initiation into Chinookan secret societies required the assembling of wealth over a period of several years for the formal initiation and to pay mentors for their instruction. This generally imposed “a considerable burden on the initiate,” amounting often to an equivalent of US\$200 (in 1938) (Ray 1938:90).

The Coast Salish initiations were similarly described as “very costly” (Boas 1897:645). Olson (1936:121) claimed that there were no high fees for joining the Quinault Wolf/*Klukwalle* Society. This seems anomalous.

### **Public Displays of Power and Wealth**

McIlwraith (1948b:4,10) stated explicitly that the prestige of the secret societies was derived from their ability to inspire awe, and that they all worked together toward that end, including promoting the ideology that members were supernaturally powerful and dangerous, and killing slaves to reinforce these claims (22). As a result of these and other tactics, when Europeans first encountered Northwest Coast tribes, the power of secret society members was described as “unquestioned.”

Secret societies used public performances of supernatural powers to create awe and fear, supplemented by physical coercion to consolidate their claims of power and make them tangible and effective. New initiates into the Bella Coola *Sisauk* Society obtained “strange power” and acted “peculiarly” and “crazy” due to the possessing spirit (McIlwraith 1948a:198). Such descriptors seem understated given the more graphic accounts of cannibalism, biting people, devouring live dogs, disemboweling dancers or beheading them or burning them or drowning them (all of whom were subsequently brought back to life), and demolishing house walls and furnishings (McIlwraith 1948b:7,107,128). The public was allowed to watch many of these performances, sometimes standing by the doorways of host houses or witnessing performances that were routinely repeated in each house of a village (McIlwraith 1948b:7,27,47,55,58,211). Destruction of property only took place during the initiation of a son into a secret society or for taking on a new role or building a house (Boas 1897:357). The possessing spirit was subsequently expelled from the dancer by society members at the end of the ceremony (McIlwraith 1948a:239; 1948b:62).

Some of the “tricks” used in society performances included making objects disappear, making suns and moons move over the walls by themselves, and throwing dog carcasses up in the air where they disappeared (McIlwraith 1948b:112,165,223,226). In conjunction with the *Kusiut* Society, shamans gave a public feast at which they demonstrated some of their supernatural abilities. These included changing water to blood or birds’ down; pulling birds’ down from fires; burning stones; making water disappear; and throwing a stick up in the air to the ridge pole, and hanging from the suspended stick (McIlwraith 1948b:565–7).

Kwakwakawakw dances resulted in a spirit possession of the dancer, giving the dancer miraculous powers, often displayed in the possession dances or exhibited by inhuman behaviors or supernatural powers, including power over pain. Dancers were then returned to normal states through the use of other members’ ritual knowledge (Drucker 1941:202). The supernatural power was derived from a member’s ancestor who had been possessed by a supernatural being who taught the ancestor the dance and gave him miraculous powers. However, such contact with the spirits could only occur during winter ceremonial events (Drucker 1941; Boas 1897:393,418). Ancestral powers included the ability to stand on red-hot stones, handle fire and put coals in one’s mouth, throw fire around, walk on fire, walk on water, make stones float, make a rattle dance by itself, disappear into the ground or plow up the floor from underground, gash oneself, push an arrow through one’s body, swallow magical sticks until blood flowed, be scalped while dancing, be speared, bring a dead salmon back to life, commit suicide by throwing oneself into fire or by cutting off one’s own head and then being brought back to life, split a dancer’s skull in two and then revive them, engage in cannibalism, and eat live dogs (Boas 1897:466,471,482,558,560,567,600,604, 635–7; Drucker 1941:204,211,214,218,220; Olson 1954:240–1). Some members of the Nuuchahnulth curing society, the *Tsaiyeq*, were reported to be able to stick a feather in the ground and make it walk around the floor, to handle hot rocks, or put red-hot rocks in their mouths (Drucker 1951:215–16). One of the most remarkable accounts is of Chief Legaic who found a look-alike slave and had him act as Legaic in a performance. The slave impersonating Legaic was then killed and cremated as part of the performance, after which the real Legaic rose miraculously from the burial box containing the slave’s ashes (Halpin 1984:283–6).

Other dramatic effects related more to economic and political power (associated with supernatural power) included the killing of slaves (viewed by the Bella Coola as necessary to accompany the novice on his spirit journey) and pouring fish oil on indoor hearths so that the flames reached the house roof, which sometimes caught fire (Boas 1897:551,636,649,658). The possessing spirits also conferred success in hunting and war (Boas 1897:396).



People could attract, control, and exorcise spirits by being initiated into the society and via the use of special dances and songs (Boas 1897:431; Loeb 1929:273). The death and resurrection of initiates or others was a common theme (Loeb 1929:273). Jonaitis (1988:147) summarizes a number of other staged displays of supernatural power described by Boas for the central Kwakwakawakw. Among the most important claimed powers was the ability to heal (Drucker 1941:203) as well as the power to capture (and return) the souls of people in the audience (Boas 1897:561). Public processions of *Hamatsa* members and dancers were conducted through the villages to the ceremonial house, with “all the people” witnessing at least parts of the initiation (e.g., exorcising of the cannibal spirit), performances, dances, and feasts in the ceremonial house, although other dances and ritual performances were only for the initiated among the Nuuchahnulth and Kwakwakawakw (Boas 1897:436, 514, 626, 628, 633, 639, 645; Spradley 1969:89).

For the Bella Coola and Tsimshian, non-initiates were admitted to some dances but had to stand by the door (Boas 1897:649, 659). Both male and female Nuuchahnulth initiates led a public procession showing off bleeding cuts on their arms and legs (Boas 1897:634; Ernst 1952:18). Blood also streamed from initiates’ mouths (Boas 1897:633), a tradition reminiscent of many Californian practices (Chapter 3) as well as Chinookan practices (Ray 1938:90). Nuuchahnulth initiates were “killed” by putting quartz crystals in their bodies. They were subsequently revived when the quartz was removed (Boas 1891:600; Drucker 1951:218), a practice resembling the *Midewiwin* and Plains secret society traditions (Chapters 5 and 6).

Ernst (1952:76, 79) reports Nuuchahnulth performances that could be publicly witnessed from individual houses and were performed almost continuously at different houses during the ritual season, although in the past spectators were only permitted to watch from inside their own homes. There were also Wolf Society performances by new and older initiates that publicly took place on the beaches in front of villages (Ernst 1952:25). In addition, a general feast was held which was supposed to be open to everyone in the village after initiations. Whether this was the same as the “Shamans’ Dance” reported by Kenyon (1980:30 citing Clutesi 1969) is not clear, but seems possible, since Clutesi attended this dance as a child in a large smoky house filled with costumed dancers, endless feasting, and dramatic performances which lasted for twenty-eight days and nights during which the Wolf Society initiated new members. The Shamans’ Dance was hosted by an important chief who only provided one such event in his lifetime.

The public was usually invited to witness the performances of the Quinault Wolf secret society. Performers entered into “frenzied states” in which they performed prodigious feats of strength, imitated their animal guardian spirits, cut their skin, skewered their flesh, pierced the flesh of their abdomen with

knives, ate live coals, and tore dogs apart to eat them (Olson 1936:121–2). While non-members were able to watch these performances, some people feared to attend them. The woman's secret curing society also held public performances in which they washed their faces with whale oil without harm and “shot” novices with balls of dried salmon, causing them to fall down as if dead, and then revived them. Performers of the curing society paraded through the village in full dancing costume to the potlatch house where people, both men and women of the home village as well as visitors, were assembled to watch (Olson 1936:126).

Chinookans also demonstrated their spirit power through dramatic magical performances such as walking on fire, standing in the middle of fires, slashing arms, or plunging daggers through their skin with miraculous instantaneous self-healing. These were openly viewed by the public, although some performances took place in houses restricted to members only (Ray 1938:90–2).

### **Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

Comparative studies have identified a wide range of well-known techniques for inducing altered states of consciousness and sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) (B. Hayden 2003:63–73). Some of the more common techniques include severe physical trials such as fasting, sensory deprivation, prolonged dancing or drumming, use of psychotropics, auditory or visual driving, strong emotional perturbations including being “shot” or “killed” or forced to consume human flesh. Except for the use of psychotropic substances, all these techniques were used on the Northwest Coast.

As Loeb (1929:249) observed, death and resurrection constituted one of the leitmotifs of most secret societies. Typically, the possessing spirit took the initiates away, killed them, and returned them initiated and reborn, as with the Nuuchahnulth *Lokoala* (Wolf) Society and Kwakwakawakw societies, which had to remove a piece of quartz from a “dead” initiate in order to revive him (Boas 1897:585–6, 590, 633, 636). Nuuchahnulth initiates were described as entering into states of “mesmerism,” while Coast Salish novices went to the woods for “inspiration” (Boas 1897:639, 646). Tsimshian, Wikeno, and Xaihais initiates into the Heavenly or Cannibal series of dances were supposed to have been taken up into the sky during their periods of seclusion, and were subsequently to be found on the beach (see Fig. 2.3) when they fell back to earth (Drucker 1941:206, 214, 220, 221; Halpin 1984:283–4). For the Kwakwakawakw, the primary goal of the winter ceremonies was to bring back youths who were in ecstatic, wild states while they resided with the supernatural protector of their secret society. New initiates into the Bella Coola *Sisauk* Society obtained “strange power” and acted “peculiarly” and “crazy” due to their possessing spirit (McIlwraith 1948a:198). Kwakwakawakw performers entered into “frenzied states” in which they performed prodigious feats, imitated their animal

guardian spirits, and supposedly injured themselves (see “Public Displays”) (Olson 1936:121–2; Kane 1996:146). Youths had to be returned to a normal psychological and social state by exorcising the possessing spirit (Boas 1897:431).

Long seclusion and fasting periods were most likely used to induce ecstatic states. Typically, training and trials for initiations occurred at some distance from villages, in the “woods,” over periods varying for the Kwakwakawakw from one to four months during which initiates subsisted on starvation diets to the point of becoming “skin and bones” (Boas 1897:437). The Tsimshian initiates at Hartley Bay spent from four to twelve days secluded, the longer periods being for the highest elite children (Drucker 1941:203,212,221–2; Mochon 1966:93). Initiates into the main Tsimshian “Shamans” dance series were sequestered for a month or two “in a hut or *cave* in the bush surrounded by corpses” (Drucker 1941:221 – emphasis added). That these initiations involved serious physical stresses (undoubtedly meant to promote ecstatic experiences) is indicated by claims that “many people have died from them” (Drucker 1941:221; Boas 1897:600; see also McIlwraith 1948b:40,75fn,81,108,138,254; Jilek 1982:84). Long seclusion periods (weeks, months, and sometimes years) tend to typify initiations into secret societies, especially for the wealthy elites as with the Bella Coola (McIlwraith 1948a:184,203–5,207,372), the Tsimshian, and the Kwakwakawakw previously noted.

Initiates into the Wolf Society (*Klukwalle*) spent five days in darkness (McIlwraith 1948a:121). Boas (1897:482) even reported the suspension of *Tōx’uit* dancers by ropes inserted under the skin of the back and legs, in a fashion resembling the Sun Dance rituals of the Plains Indians, which must have involved altered states of consciousness.

Initiation into Chinookan secret societies included a spirit quest in which novices fasted and learned to inflict self-tortures followed by miraculous recoveries. Fasting was also part of the three-day initiation into the secret society (Ray 1938:89).

### **Enforcement**

In general, Ruyle (1973:617) argued that the monopolization of supernatural power by the ruling class functioned to produce fear, awe, and acquiescence on the part of the uninitiated populace and supported an exploitative system. There was a wide range of tactics used to intimidate, persuade, or coerce people into compliance with the professed ideological claims, rules, and actions of secret societies, but foremost among the tactics used was terror. Drucker (1941:226) categorically stated that the function of secret societies on the Northwest Coast was to dominate society by the use of violence or black magic. Accounts by some informants portrayed them as “terroristic organizations” (Drucker 1941). People who transgressed the “laws of the dance” could be murdered, an apparently common occurrence. “When they heard a dance was to be given,

the low-rank people all began to weep, for they knew someone would be murdered" (Drucker 1941:226). In addition, when disagreements broke out among members, even high-ranking individuals could be targeted by the society (Drucker 1941). In general, the use of masks to impersonate spirits constituted the "secret" of spirit appearances, so that if any uninitiated individuals saw a mask being carved (thereby revealing the real non-spirit nature of the masks), they were killed (Loeb 1929:272). On the other hand, some of the secret society initiations involved the public removal of a novice's mask (e.g., Boas 1897:626,628). Thus, the claim that secrets were revealed by knowing that the masks were not literally supernatural beings may have been more a pretext for terrorizing non-initiates.

Summing up the situation among the Kwakwakawakw, Boas (1897:466–9) noted that the enforcers of *Hamatsa* Society laws (mainly the Grizzly Bears and "Fool Dancers") threw stones at people, hit them with sticks, or even stabbed them or killed them for any transgressions of ceremonial rules (see Fig. 2.4). Even people who coughed or laughed during the ceremonies had to provide a feast for the secret society members (Boas 1897:507,526). Secret societies also organized raiding parties, engaged assassins, and regularly threatened to kill members who divulged society secrets or killed non-members who trespassed into areas used as special meeting places or for ritual events, or even saw some of the sacred paraphernalia, thereby learning some of the secrets of the societies (Boas 1897:435; see also McIlwraith 1948a:177–8; 1948b:18,263; Halpin 1984:287–8). Anyone revealing society mysteries among the Coast Salish was torn to bits (Boas 1897:645,650).

For the Nuuchahnulth, Ernst (1952:13,64–5,67) reported that people who "abused" the secret rituals were put to death within living memory, and that those who laughed during ceremonies had their mouths torn down from the lip outward. Anyone who revealed the ceremonial plans for the Wolf Society ceremonies was severely punished. Even those who broke activity taboos or initiates who failed to wear black markings on their faces for the year following initiation were punished (Ernst 1952:68,79).

Among the Bella Coola, Drucker (1941:220fn49) observed some instances of members who carried clubs apparently acting as dance police, while McIlwraith (1948a: 192–3,266; 1948b:11,16,32,36,68,200,203,258–9,262) frequently mentioned that anyone responsible for divulging the "secret" that the masked performers and performances were not really visitations and miraculous acts of supernatural beings would be severely punished, frequently with death, whether the offending act was accidental or intentional. Blunders by dancers or failures of dramatic stage effects used in performances (which revealed the true nature of the performing "spirits") similarly resulted in killing the offender(s) or the offenders having to redo the entire ritual, including all preparatory feasts and expenses (Boas 1897:433). Anyone contravening society

rules, including sexual prohibitions, revealing society knowledge, showing any disrespect, diminishing the integrity of the society, intruding in designated sacred areas, or talking/coughing/laughing during a performance, was also punished. If new initiates did not say the required phrases, they and their families could be killed (McIlwraith 1948b:39). Most of these observations were substantiated by Boas (1897:417,433,645,650). If the act was egregious, secret society members in other villages could even attack the village where the offence occurred, presumably because the members in surrounding villages were closely connected and it was considered threatening to their own claims to supernatural connections and power (McIlwraith 1948a:192–3,266; 1948b:18–20). *Kusiut* members were especially eager to recruit sorcerers who could kill individuals by supernatural means (probably using the power of suggestion) since they often relied on such means to kill offending individuals (McIlwraith 1948a:695–9,740). In addition to policing the most obvious offenses, secret societies also enlisted a number of young “spies” to identify doubters in the community and to deal with them (McIlwraith 1948b:14).

Tsimshian individuals who broke the “laws” of the societies were killed, while, as with most other groups, death was threatened for unauthorized people trespassing near ritual locations or into secret society rituals, especially if they discovered the “tricks” used in demonstrations of supernatural powers during performances (Halpin 1984:287–8). Tsimshian technical assistants could also be killed if they botched special supernatural effects so that the supernatural display became apparent to spectators as an artifice. Halpin reports one incident where an entire crew of technicians committed suicide rather than face their fate at the hands of the elites after one such effect failed. According to Garfield and Wingert (1977:41), “recipients of secret society power were dangerous to all who had not been initiated by the same spirits.”

The initiates to the Xaihai Kwakwakawakw Cannibal Society were told:

Now you are seeing all the things the chiefs use. You must remember to take care not to reveal the secrets of the Shamans [society members]. You must abide by the rules of the work of the chiefs. These things you see before you will kill you if you break the rules of the dance. If you make a mistake your parents will die, all your relatives will die.

(Drucker 1941:213)

The use of power to kill transgressors of society “rules” was viewed as “evil” by at least some community members (Drucker 1941:221; also A. Mills, and Maggie Carew, personal communication). Among the Owikeno Kwakwakawakw, Olson (1954:217,234,240,241) reported similar killings or beatings for breaking the rules of the dances.

The Quinault punished smiling and laughing during their secret society performances by painfully deforming the offender’s mouth, dragging him or

her around the fire by the hair, gashing their arms, and blackening their face. Snoops or intruders into their ritual preparation room were reportedly killed (Olson 1936:121–2).

### **Cannibalism**

Whether cannibalism existed in secret societies on the Northwest Coast or not is a contentious issue. Drucker (1941:217,221–2) reported that Xaisla Cannibal Society members pretended to eat bits of corpses, giving pieces of flesh torn off to their attendants who concealed them, while among the Tsimshian a corpse was given to each Cannibal Society initiate at a mummy feast. Olson (1954:245) recorded conflicting opinions as to whether human flesh was actually eaten or only held in the teeth among the Wikeno. Curtis (in Touchie 2010:109), too, was skeptical that actual cannibalism took place, although George Hunt (Boas' main informant) affirmed its existence.

Among the southern Kwakwakawakw, Boas (1897:439–41,649,658; also McIlwraith 1948b:108) cited several eye-witness accounts of *Hamatsa* initiates eating human flesh as well as biting “pieces of flesh out of the arms and chest of the people.” He also recorded at least two cases of slaves being killed and consumed for *Hamatsa* ritual purposes.

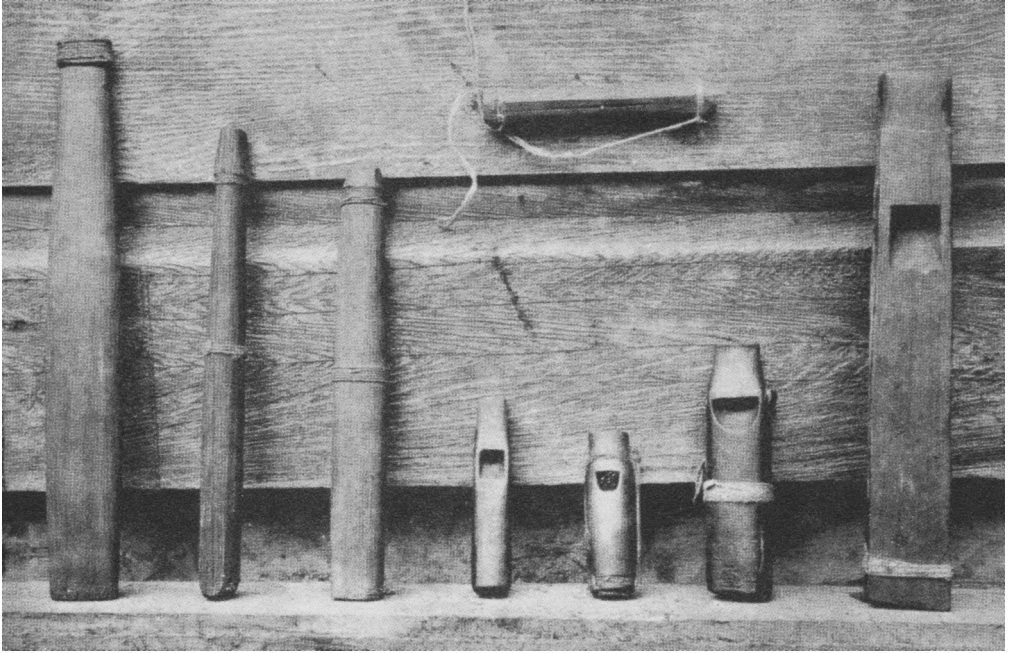
Boas (1897:649,658) also reported cannibalism as part of Bella Coola and Nishga initiations or ceremonies. He added that initiates in the Cannibal Society took human flesh with them to eat on their celestial journeys, for which a slave was killed, half of which was eaten by members (Boas 1900:118). However, McIlwraith (1948b:107) felt that this was done with stage props rather than real consumption of human flesh, except that he acknowledged that slaves were sometimes killed, possibly to make such claims more believable (108). He also reported that chiefs belonging to secret societies killed slaves and buried them in their houses in order to give more power to their *Kusiut* paraphernalia (22). The sacrifice of slaves was also recorded as a regular part of the Wolf ceremonies of the Nuuchahnulth (Boas 1897:636) and was reported by Kane (1996:121–2,148–9) a half century earlier. Members of the Quinault *Klokwalke* (Wolf) Society also had a reputation for killing and eating people during their secret rites (Olson 1936:121).

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

Whistles (Fig. 2.7) made of wood or bone were the voices of spirits or the voices of those possessed by spirits or signaled the arrival of spirits, as with most California groups, and whistles were often kept by initiates (Boas 1897:435,438,446,503; Drucker 1941:210,213,216–18,221,222–3; McIlwraith 1948a:208,177; Ernst 1952:66–8; Olson 1954:246; Spradley 1969:83; Halpin





2.7 Various types of wooden whistles used to represent the sounds of spirits in Bella Coola societies on the Northwest Coast (McIlwraith 1948b:Plate 2).

1984:290). A surprising variety of large and small whistle forms were photographed by McIlwraith (1948a:Plate 12; 1948b:28,36), who even recorded one (not illustrated) blown by means of a bladder filled with air, held under the arm.

Masks were carved by secret society members and represented spirits, but were sometimes supposed to be burned after major rituals like those of the Cannibals (Boas 1897:435,632–9; Drucker 1941:203–5,211,215; Olson 1954:245) and after all *Kusiut* ceremonies of the Bella Coola, apparently in an attempt to keep the spirit charade a secret, although *Sisauk* members received masks to be kept after their initiation (McIlwraith 1948a:238–9; 1948b:27–8). Masks were normally kept hidden among the Tsimshian, and only displayed or used during supernatural performances (Halpin 1984:284,287–8). Masks used by impersonators of wolves in the Wolf Society of the Nuuchahnulth were “jealously guarded for a lifetime, and relinquished only at death to some duly appointed heir.” These were considered ancestral family spirit allies (Ernst 1952:66–8,91).

Weasel skins were worn by Bella Coola *Sisauk* members as an insignia of membership, while members of the *Kusiut* Society wore swan skins with feathers as well as cedar bark rings and head circlets. Some members wore aprons with deer hooves or puffin beaks attached (McIlwraith 1948a:190; 1948b:37,39,45).

Rattles were used in secret society rituals, including some shell rattles used by initiates which were suspended by skin inserts. Other rattles were used to purify novices (Boas 1897:438,497,532). Bird-shaped rattles were used by Bella Coola initiates in their dances (McIlwraith 1948a:206).

Bullroarers and drums signaled the presence of supernatural beings among the Koskimo (Drucker 1941:219) or were considered the voice of the spirits (Boas 1897:610–11). Although Loeb (1929:274) states that bullroarers were only used by the Kwakwakawakw, McIlwraith (1948b:28,250) lists them as part of the *Kusiut* Society paraphernalia of the Bella Coola.

Copper nails were used by Kwakwakawakw initiates for scratching (Boas 1897:538).

Horns, tubes, and trumpets (Drucker 1941:211,214,215,218,220,224) were used to represent the voices of spirits or souls (Olson 1954:235,246; McIlwraith 1948b:Plate 3).

Eagle bone drinking tubes were used by Kwakwakawakw novice initiates in order to avoid contaminating others with their untamed spirit possession (Boas 1897:431,538), a practice similar to that of many Californian groups.

Smoking pipes are mentioned as used in secret society ceremonies (McIlwraith 1948b:28).

Dog skulls were hung as pendants (Drucker 1941:218), and bear or wolf heads and hides were used by Cannibal initiates to represent their supernatural patrons (McIlwraith 1948b:79,102–4). Cannibals often wore bear skins during their performances (McIlwraith 1948b:102–3).

Brown (2000:88–9) identified “slave killer” clubs as being used in Nuuchahnulth secret society rituals, possibly Warrior dances.

Cedar bark rings for necks, heads, ankles, and wrists were usually dyed red and used to calm or control Cannibal or similar possessing spirits, as well as being worn as a “badge” of society membership (Fig. 2.8) (Boas 1897:435; Drucker 1941:204,209–10,217–18,220–1,223; McIlwraith 1948b:37,39,45).

Wooden figurines or dolls of animals, birds, or people were used in some ceremonies (Drucker 1941:215,218; McIlwraith 1948b:28).

Decorated staffs were used by Coast Salish Sto:lo winter dance initiates for ritual walking (Jilek and Jilek-Aall 2000:8) as well as by Tlingit shamans and political officials (Kamenskii 1985:34–6,83). Ceremonial “sticks” or “staffs” were used by the Bella Coola *Kusiut* Society and decorated with bark and bird down (McIlwraith 1948b:69,168).

Poles wrapped with cedar bark featured in Kwakwakawakw *Hamatsa* ceremonies in both short (6 foot) and long (30–40 foot) versions (Boas 1897:446,531), similar to Californian traditions.

Carved bowls and dishes used in secret society feasts had individual names and were given away as prestige goods (Boas 1897:552–3). Among the Bella Coola, they were used to serve chiefs if the host was wealthy (McIlwraith





2.8 *Hamatsa* members gathered to attend a Koskimo Kwakwakawakw society feast (Boas 1897). Note again, the accompanying women.

1948a:217). Perhaps most prestige goods (coppers, bracelets, carvings, and others) can be considered peripheral paraphernalia of secret societies since they were used to pay for initiations and displays and were given away at secret society ceremonies.

Some stones were considered as special sources of power and as lucky. They were sometimes carefully kept in boxes, one example of which was about “a foot” long (McIlwraith 1948a:537–9), and may account for a few unusual pebbles being found in structures thought to be ritual structures at the Keatley Creek site where I excavated possible examples.

Quartz crystals were used by the Bella Coola societies to “shoot” supernatural power into new initiates or other members, and to remove the debilitating effects of being shot (McIlwraith 1948b:34–6, 96, 105). They were the “supernatural treasure of the Wolves” among the Nuuchahnulth (Ernst 1952:72).

## **Secret Society Structures and Settlement Patterns**

### *Village Locations*

The Kwakwakawakw, Nuuchahnulth, and Bella Coola secret societies each “had a separate house” in the village. This did not necessarily mean that they

owned separate structures but only that a residential house (presumably of a high-ranking member of the society) was designated as taboo to non-initiates during the period that secret societies held their rituals inside it (Boas 1897:436,504,612,646,649,657,659; Drucker 1941:201,207,211fn27; McIlwraith 1948b:7,133–4). Such houses were cleaned for dancing, profane items were removed, and a central hearth was established for society activities. The houses were publicly marked by hanging a cedar bark ring or other cedar bark symbols outside, or the houses were cordoned off so that non-initiates would not witness any of the secret rituals. Boas specifically states that it was the “Master of Ceremonies” house that served as a dance house for the Kwakwakawakw, and a separate house was used by society members to prepare for their performances and rituals. In contrast, for the Nuuchahnulth and the Bella Coola, it was the house of the person paying for the initiation which was used as the “taboo” house of the society for their ceremonies (Boas 1891:601; 1897:633; McIlwraith 1948b:24,33,92). George MacDonald (personal communication) has also indicated that the prevalent practice among the Tsimshian was probably simply to transform one of the larger residential “long houses” into temporary secret society dance venues, especially where leaders lacked sufficient resources or labor to construct special facilities for public dance displays.

Within the house, a “room,” or partitioned section, at the rear was used for the seclusion of novices. For new cannibal initiates, this was referred to as the House of *Baxbakualanuxsi'wae*, the Cannibal Spirit (Boas 1897:446). For the Bella Coola *Kusiut* dances, members often erected temporary “raised enclosures” within the main performance house (perhaps like stages) and they *spread clean sand on the floor* for the ceremonial entry of supernatural beings (McIlwraith 1948b:45,170,190,255). Sproat (1987:182) reports a similar use of high-ranking members’ houses for Wolf Society rituals among the Nuuchahnulth.

Sometimes Kwakwakawakw initiates were simply confined to one “room” in a house, or in the dance house, for a few days. This “room” was simply a screen of boards set up at the far end of the structure (Spradley 1969:85; Sproat 1987:203,215). One such house interior is probably represented in Kane’s 1846 painting of a house on the Columbia River (Harper 1971:85). Depictions of other house interiors are devoid of the elaborate ritual paraphernalia in this painting. A pole, reported to be 30–40 feet high and wrapped with cedar bark, was supposed to be erected in the house used for *Hamatsa* ceremonies, although a shorter version only 6 feet long was used during the actual performances. Both pole sizes are reminiscent of some Californian traditions described in Chapter 3 (Boas 1897:446,531). Movable screens with iconographic images were also used in ceremonies among the Nuuchahnulth at the time of first contact with Europeans (Marshall 2000:112).

Drucker (1941:203,204,209) frequently noted dance performances or feasts that occurred in “the dance house”; however, it is not clear whether

this referred to a house belonging to a secret society member being used for society dance performances or to a special structure that was used for dances, and if so whether this was a traditional feature or something that developed after European contact. In historic times, large communities had, and often still have, specialized structures for ceremonial events including dances (as reported by Loeb 1929:273 and Spradley 1969:84–5,89 for the Kwakwakawakw, and Krause 1956:88 for the Tlingit). However, Marshall (2000) has demonstrated that these communal ritual/ceremonial structures developed after 1890 in response to the shift from large multifamily households suitable for large ritual performances to smaller nuclear family residences. David Archer (personal communication) observed that none of the Late Middle Period (500 BCE to 500 CE) village sites or early historic period sites in the Tsimshian area appear to have any structures that are distinctly different in size, shape, or location from regular domestic structures, so that it seems unlikely that special secret society structures existed within villages of those periods. However, interestingly, there was an increase in the size and shape of domestic structures in the late prehistoric and early historic periods that made it possible to accommodate larger performances in the centers of normal residential houses (e.g., for dancing or feasting). Little room seems to have been available for such activities in the smaller houses of the middle prehistoric period.

Recent archaeological survey work in the Lower Fraser Valley of British Columbia has reported the occurrence of one or a few relatively large plank structures (some which had three-tiered floors) within prehistoric villages primarily composed of pithouses, with a common ratio being about one plank house for every two to seventeen pithouses (Ritchie 2010:122,146,161). Although Ritchie viewed all these structures as residential in function, I think that the plank house structures may represent either secret society meeting locations or communally used “dance houses” similar to the dance houses of many Californian groups, which seem to occur in about the same or even lower ratio of one sweat or dance house for every three nuclear family residences (Kroeber 1925:82). The Tlingit were reported to have had special “bath houses” adjacent to some high-ranking households where political elites would gather (de Laguna 1972:305–6). This is a pattern reminiscent of Californian sweat lodges used by secret societies for some of their rituals (Chapter 3). Whether the Tlingit bath houses were used by secret society elites is unclear, but it seems plausible as part of a general pattern of exclusive gathering places for elites who typically formed secret societies.

### *Remote Locations*

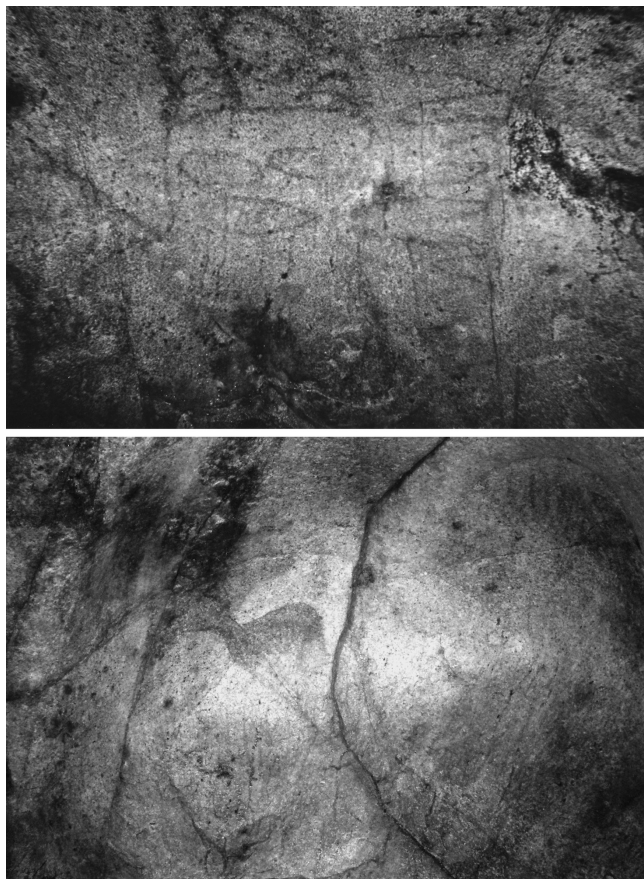
In general, the seclusions, training, and trials of initiates occurred at some distance from villages, in the “woods,” over periods varying for the Kwakwakawakw from one to two months during which little was eaten, and for the Hartley

Bay Tsimshian from four to twelve days, the longer periods being for the highest elite children (Drucker 1941:203,212,221-2). At least one Gitksan dance was originally obtained in a cave where dance spirits dwelled and where initiates were supposed to go during their seclusion (Drucker 1941:222-3), and initiates into the main Tsimshian “Shamans” dance series were sequestered for a month or two “*in a hut or cave in the bush surrounded by corpses*” (Drucker 1941:221 – emphasis added). Similarly, the Wikeno Kwakwakawakw initiates usually stayed “*in a shelter or cave which has been prepared for him out in the woods*” (Drucker 1941:203 – emphasis added; Olson 1954:243). Kwakwakawakw initiates into the *aL’aqim* Society were also taken to “*a cave inhabited by spirits*” where they remained for four days (Drucker 1941:210 – emphasis added). Each Bella Bella local group apparently used a separate cave in which spirits of ceremonials dwelled and taught initiates songs, dances, and magic (Drucker 1941:210, fn24). The Cave of the Animals (EeSo-28) in the Broughton Archipelago area was also used to store secret society masks and for secret society ceremonies (“winter ceremonials”) and initiations, as well as having a number of animal pictographs (Fig. 2.9) on the cave wall (RBCM 1977; Judith Williams, personal communication). A model of this cave with its associated masks has been on display as the ‘Cave of Supernatural Power’ at the Royal British Columbian Museum, and an account of the myth associated with the dance which originated in the cave is recounted in Sewid’s (1969:39–41) autobiography (see also Alfred 2004:25–7). Several other cave and rock art sites were similarly linked with secret societies (Doris Lundy, personal communication).

In other instances, it is simply reported that initiates disappeared or were taken “into the woods” (Drucker 1941:202,218,219; Boas 1897:547,632ff,646). Mochon (1966:92–3) provided a graphic description of an initiate’s shelter from Barrett’s field notes based on George Hunt’s accounts. The very small shelter was well over 400 meters from the village and consisted of “a single slab leaned up against a hemlock and providing just room enough so that he could stretch out.” The initiate was also smoke-curing a corpse for his initiation.

Similar remote locations were apparently also used for vision quests which may or may not have been part of secret society initiations. In the Northwest, vision quests were primarily undertaken by elites who acquired more, and more powerful, patron spirits from visions (Schulting 1995). Vision quests were not undertaken by “lay people” among Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian (Drucker 1951:235), although everyone had at least a nominal guardian spirit among the Tlingit. Coast Salish adolescents sought guardian spirits, sometimes recording them as rock art images, which was also true of shamanic experiences (Hill and Hill 1974). Cairns and rock walls in remote areas were also probably part of spirit quests on the Plateau and among the Lower Chinookans (Ray 1942:237 cited by Carlson 2011:645).





2.9 Two interior photographs of the walls in the Cave of the Animals in the Broughton Archipelago with ochred or charcoaled portions depicting animals (Photos courtesy of Judith Williams).

Ritual paraphernalia also appears to have generally been stored in secret locations “far away from human habitation,” such as large hollow cedar trees (Jilek and Jilek-Aall 2000:9) and, one might expect, caves, as documented for the Cave of the Animals. McIlwraith (1948b:8,21–2, Plate 6) reported “repositories” as “subterranean” places where one’s patron spirit(s) could be encountered, typically in “caves” (apparently rock shelters or rock crevices as in Plate 6), or tree hollows. There were reputedly hundreds of such locations around Bella Coola. Although McIlwraith did not mention any storage of ritual paraphernalia at such locations, this seems likely and may account for the isolated finds of ritual objects such as figurine bowls far from known village sites in the Northwest, in which case such isolated finds may be good archaeological indicators of secret society practices.

George MacDonald (personal communication) also indicated that secret societies would sometimes meet outside villages for especially secret activities.

Rose Island just outside Port Simpson was one such location. Stretches of clan-owned beaches would also be reserved for use by secret societies for some activities such as initiations and disposal of those killed by the society. In a similar vein, McIlwraith (1948a:91,177–8) described places near every village where secret society members and chiefs met to discuss plans for winter (and presumably other) ceremonies. These were places of dread which were tabooed for most people owing to the supernatural powers of society members. Elsewhere, he referred to secret sacred meeting places in the forest for *Kusiut* members (McIlwraith 1948b:14,150–1,155). One such location was about one quarter mile (*c.* 400 meters) from the village located on a ledge of rock jutting out over a waterfall. Another was located in a small valley about four miles from the sea where petroglyphs could be seen (Barker and Cole 2003:71). Most were at the bases of cliffs, near a natural feature, or at secluded caves or ledges (McIlwraith 1948b:14,150–1,155). There was no mention of any structures at these locations although some were associated with rock carvings. Boas (1897:547) and Spradley (1969:88) also referred to a “secret meeting place in the woods” where Kwakwakawakw planners of initiations and ceremonies would congregate and practice performances, excluding non-initiates. Boas (1897:527) also referred to a “Place of Supernatural Power” located about an eighth of a mile from a village, presumably also shown in his Plate 43 (described as the “place where the secret meetings of the winter ceremonial are held”), and presumably used by secret society members. The area appeared to be a simple clearing in the woods, and no structures are visible in his photo. He also reported a meeting place used over generations for a special performance (the *Ame'lk*). This was located about 150 meters from the end of the village (Boas 1897:582–3).

In sum, secret societies among complex hunter/gatherers along the Northwest Coast used at least four distinctive types of locations for their activities:

- 1 venues for public displays of power (usually within or near villages);
- 2 locations for secret meetings (either within villages and/or in more or less remote locations depending on climate or other factors);
- 3 locations for the seclusion of initiates (usually in locations at some distance from villages, and possibly the same locations used for secret meetings); and
- 4 isolated remote locations for storing ritual paraphernalia whether owned by individuals or by secret societies.

Whatever the specifics may turn out to be concerning public displays, a general point is that secret societies usually needed some large public facility in order to conduct their public displays of supernatural and corporal power. These could take the form of temporarily transformed large residential structures, separate large “dance house” structures in the community (and possible precursors of

later churches used by congregations), open plaza areas or dancing grounds such as those used by the Chumash and Pueblos, or other alternative forms of large facilities.

### **Burials**

McIlwraith (1948a:437–41,443,455) described the death of a *Sisaok* leader in which a dummy of the body was taken up through the roof of the house by a raven or eagle spirit while the real body was buried in secret, apparently in the community cemetery, 50–100 meters behind the houses. Secret burials of secret society leaders were common in such societies elsewhere. Kamenskii (1985:78) reported that “shamans” were buried in caves. Whether these were secret society members with the title of “shaman,” or whether they were bona fide shamans is uncertain. I have not found any other descriptions of burials for specifically identified members of secret societies in the Northwest, although the burial of at least some people in caves was widespread.

## **Cross-cutting Kinship and Community Relationships (Regional Organizations)**

### *Kin Groups*

In discussing the Gitksan, John Adams (1973:115) made the important point that for those at the head of kinship groups, there was no way within the kinship system to increase wealth or power. In order to do this, ambitious heads had to go outside kinship groups to forge war or other alliances or establish secret dance societies. Thus, secret societies may be key stepping stones to the creation of increased political complexity in the archaeological record. Drucker (1941:225fn72) categorically stated that on the Northwest Coast “Secret society membership is one of the few institutions that cuts cleanly across the social group” (at least for high-ranking individuals). Ford (1968:24) also affirmed that members were from different clans.

Positions in secret societies often had to be filled from specific families, lineages, or clans, especially for the highest ranked positions as with the Nuuchahnulth and Bella Coola (Boas 1897:634,649; McIlwraith 1948b:3,16). Specific roles in Nuuchahnulth societies – such as the wolf impersonators and those who broke into the houses – were hereditary (Ernst 1952:11). Among the Tlingit, dances were clan prerogatives or owned by families (Emmons 1991:21) and secret societies “cut across lineage lines and represent one of the few activities which were organized across lineage lines” (Rathburn 1976:43). These requirements ensured that secret society membership cross-cut kinship groups and included members from all the important such groups.

Although the Kwakwakawakw dances were inherited from mythic encounters by an ancestor that conferred power on the ancestor (which was subsequently passed on to one of his descendants; Drucker 1941:202),

membership in societies included men from different kinship groups and often specific roles in secret societies were allocated on a hereditary basis to members of specific families, lineages, or clans (Boas 1897:431,621; Spradley 1969:82; see also “Roles” above). This system allowed some flexibility since the transfer of spirit dances could occur through marriage to a son from the mother’s lineage (accompanied by lavish payments), or by killing the owner of the dance (Boas 1897:421,621). In fact, Boas (1897:471) recorded a war waged just to acquire a secret society mask, and presumably the dances and spiritual power that went with it. Initiation into the Bella Bella Cannibal Society was reserved for the highest ranking chiefs and the required regalia was supposed to be acquired via marriage as a dowry (Drucker 1941:208). Such practices must have ensured flexible cross-cutting kinship memberships and support groups. Similarly, “all the chiefs” had the right to be initiated into either of the two Tsimshian secret societies and membership was part of the validation for chiefly succession (Drucker 1941:222).

### *Regional Networks*

Regional ritual networks may have played key roles in creating regional interaction spheres as displayed in material items and based on styles and materials used in ritual paraphernalia. *Hamatsa* initiations drew *Hamatsa* members, initiation candidates, singers, and dancers “from all over the Kwakwakawakw nation,” or at least a large region, for two to three weeks of winter ceremonies and initiations (Spradley 1969:83–4,87). Ford (1968:24) also affirmed that society members were from different tribes, thus constituting a regional ritual network.

Among the Nuuchahnulth, the most elite members of the Wolf Society secretly held an annual regional meeting with a public performance of the wolf dance at an elite member’s house which rotated among members. Up to seventy members attended from both American villages and Vancouver Island villages (Sproat 1987:182). In addition, Ernst (1952:11) recorded that the chiefs from four different principal families of the tribe met together to determine the plans for the Wolf Society ceremonies.

Members of a secret society in one Bella Coola village were “accepted as a member in any other one” (McIlwraith 1948a:18), while serious cases of revealing secret society knowledge at performances could be grounds for punishing raids and attacks by members from other villages (McIlwraith 1948a:192–3). This strongly indicates that an organized regional secret society network existed. This is explicitly stated in discussing the “marshals” of the *Kusiut* Society who cooperated on an inter-village and inter-tribal basis in maintaining and policing the supernatural fictions presented to the uninitiated, even to the extent of waging war on groups that transgressed this imperative (McIlwraith 1948b:18–20). In society dance performances as well, “fellows”



from neighboring villages were invited (29), while “leading *Kukusiut* from neighbouring towns are often invited” to ceremonies in host villages (174,201) and invitations to *Kusiut* and *Sisaok* events were sent out as far as the Nass River and Alert Bay (McIlwraith 1948a:208,211,224). McIlwraith (1948b:252) also mentioned that marshals from *two* villages got together to remove crystals shot into initiates or others.

Performances of the curing society of the Quinault were attended by guests from other villages who represented secret societies and performed songs and dances in the potlatch house of the home village (Olson 1936:126). Thus, regional networks were prominent characteristics of secret society organizations.

### **Initiate Marking**

Initiates of secret societies on the Northwest Coast generally appear to have been physically marked in some way, often involving some cutting (Loeb 1929:274). For instance, Nuuchahnulth initiates had deep cuts made into their arms and legs which they displayed streaming with blood in public processions (Boas 1897:639). Such marking may have functioned to identify bona fide society members on a regional level.

### **Power Animals**

Powerful patron animals, whether derived from natural or imaginary species, were used to help achieve domination by secret society members. In contrast to the subsistence importance of animal prey species, the nature of most animals used in Northwest Coast iconography was dominating and threatening – characteristics which were supposed to be conferred upon their human confederates. Specific power animals tended to characterize entire regions, being depicted there in common art motifs. Of particular note among the pantheon of power animals of the Northwest Coast are the mythological “monsters,” including the *Sisiutl* or other sea monsters. Such imaginary creatures occurred in secret societies elsewhere as well.

Supernatural guardian spirits of dances especially featured bears, the personae of which were often adopted when secret society members set out to punish or kill people. However, wolves, large birds, feathered serpents, heavenly and other spirits were also part of the Northwest Coast power ideologies (Drucker 1941:207,209,216–19,223; Olson 1954:245–6). Tlingit shamans claimed supernatural powers commensurate with the number of guardian or possessing spirits that they had acquired (Loeb 1929:275). The *Que'qutsa* division of secret societies among the Kwakwakawakw was characterized by spirit animal patrons (as they existed before their transformations into animals) including wolves, thunderbirds, wasps, bears, killer whales, ravens, dogs, sea monsters, eagles, ghosts, and salmon. Grizzly bears were the most important

and were greatly feared as helpers of the *Hamatsa* Society (Boas 1897:419–20,466,482,498–9). The Nuuchahnulth animal patrons included bears, wolves, eagles, and whales (Boas 1897:638,648,658).

The most powerful and feared possessing animals among the Bella Coola secret society dancers were the bear, the wolf, and the eagle, all of which hungered for human flesh and instilled cannibalistic cravings in their human subjects (McIlwraith 1948b:71–90). Guardian spirits acquired by Chinookan secret society novices predominantly took the form of black bears and cougars (Ray 1938:89).

### Number of Societies in Communities

If the role of secret societies was to promote social solidarity within communities, one would expect single organizations within those communities. Instead, there are frequently two or three or more secret society organizations within individual communities which makes sense primarily in factional and competitive contexts. According to Drucker (1941:227–8, Table 1), the Southern Kwakwakawakw studied by Boas had only one secret society, although elsewhere he mentions that other Kwakwakawakw groups and northern groups had two or three exclusive secret societies in each group, with a series of ranked dance grades within each. Ford (1968:24) counted as many as five, although this may have been throughout the region. However, in Boas' (1897:419–20,498–9) descriptions, there are two basic divisions or categories in the organization of the dances: the "Seals" (including the Bears, *Hamatsas*, and others) and the more animal-oriented "*Que'qutsas*" with some fifty-three different dances. Other groups only had six to eleven recognized dance groups (Boas 1897:500), although whether these constituted single internally ranked organizations or multiple ranked organizations is unclear. Boas (1897:644,651) stated that the Nishga had six ranked societies while the Coast Salish had only two. In some places, each dance group such as the Bears or *Hamatsas* seems to have formed a separate society with ranked roles within the group. In other instances, it seems that all the dance groups in each main division were ranked as part of a single organization. Thus, it is far from clear as to whether there were two secret societies, or dozens of them.

I will follow Drucker's lead and conservatively treat the dance groups as forming two basic secret societies. This was also the case with the Bella Coola, where there were clearly two distinct societies, the *Kusiut* and the *Sisauk*, with perhaps a third less prestigious or upstart rival society, the *A'alk*, about which little is said (McIlwraith 1948a:285). The *A'alk* Society may have been a newly formed organization with rival ambitions or one formed to defend members from depredations of the more powerful secret societies, but little was recorded about it. Within each of these societies, there were specific spirit patrons or types of possessions associated with specific dances

(McIlwraith describes forty-four of these), and recognized “marshals” who authorized all performances by members, as well as other specific roles (see below) (McIlwraith 1948b:114, 124, 128–9, 234–54). McIlwraith explicitly stated that those possessed by the cannibal spirit did *not* form a separate society or group and they often worked in concert with other dancers and performances (McIlwraith 1948b:10). This organizational structure appears to have been similar to what Boas described for the Kwakwakawakw as a “series” of dances.

Among the Tsimshian, Halpin (1984:283) reported three exclusive secret societies with hereditary prerequisites for membership and two “ritual moieties” (open to all individuals with wealth).

In addition to the Wolf Society, Ernst (1952:26) described a Deer Society and a Wild Man Society for the Nuuchahnulth as well as several specific dances that women could adopt. A curing society with predominantly female members was also mentioned by Boas (1897:643).

The Quinault apparently had two secret societies, one for curing and the other a Wolf Society with a cannibalistic reputation (Olson 1936:122).

For the Interior Shuswap, Teit (1909:577) listed almost thirty dance societies which he compared to dance societies in the east and west, at least some of which appear to have corresponded to secret societies (e.g., the Wolf, Dog, Corpse, and Cannibal Societies).

### **Number of Members, Proportion of Population**

Given the frequent presence of guests from secret societies in other villages, it is difficult to determine what proportion of the populations were members of secret societies, especially given the complicating factors of weakening/collapsing influence of the societies and looser admission standards following epidemic depopulations and European settlement (McIlwraith 1948b:2). However, it is of interest to note that in Bella Coola, there were generally four or five “marshals” in most villages, and that forty to fifty *Kusiut* Society members often accompanied new initiates when they were possessed (McIlwraith 1948b:16, 131).

Curtis estimated that 60 percent of the native residents at Fort Rupert were “shamans,” i.e., initiated into a secret society (Touchie 2010:103), a proportion that seems exceptional and may have been the result of depopulation combined with the unusual wealth provided by the fur trade.

Although all males were expected to join the Nuuchahnulth Wolf Society, the upper ranks of the society were severely restricted and seem to have acted as a separate organization. Only a small percentage of the Chinookan population became members of secret societies (Ray 1938:91).

### **Sex**

All Wikeno Kwakwakawakw dancers were men; dances were prohibited to women (Drucker 1941:202; Olson 1954:239). Women were initiated into at

least some secret societies, acting primarily as attendants or as singers of supernatural songs to drive away possessing spirits. In Bella Bella women performed some dances prior to the entry of the Cannibals, and a woman even called initiates back from the underworld (Drucker 1941:204,205,207,208,210; Olson 1954:242,245). Among the Xaihais, high-ranking women made the neck and head rings for *Ulala* initiates (Drucker 1941:211).

Among the Kwakwakawakw, some women were *Hamatsa* initiates with roles primarily as healers, singers, and food providers. Women were also the first to receive gifts and they participated in major feasts (Boas 1897:438,462–3,514,529–30). They performed dances and were also initiated into other societies (Boas 1897:565,573). The Bella Coola secret societies were for both males and females (McIlwraith 1948a:180).

Women were prohibited from being members of the Deer Society and Wild Man Society among the Nuuchahnulth (Ernst 1952:25–6), and the Wolf Society initiates were described as being boys.

Women were eligible to be members of Chinookan secret societies, but were decidedly in the minority (Ray 1938:91).

### Age of Initiates

“Children” were initiated among the Wikeno and Xaihais Kwakwakawakw, in one case as young as three years old, but seven years old appears to have been a more common lower age of initiation for some boys (Drucker 1941:208,211,214; Olson 1954:240–1). Boas (1897:456,498–9) reported that children destined to become *Hamatsa* initiates had to first join a lower ranking society for seven years beginning at ten to twelve years old. A Bella Bella man could bring “his small son into the dance house” (Boas 1897:211). Curtis (1916:142–3) observed that among the Haida, “Little children could be initiated into the society ... They spent the eleven days behind the curtain, supposedly dead for eight days and absent with the spirits for the remaining three.” A number of vintage photographs published by Joanaitis (1988:Figs. 47 and 48) clearly depict boy initiates in the seven- to ten-year-old range, even for the Cannibal Society. Full entry into the third level of the Cannibal Society took twelve years and required a great deal of wealth, with few men able to achieve this rank. The Heavenly series of dances of the Wikeno Kwakwakawakw were even more costly (Olson 1954:205,213).

McIlwraith (1948a:207,238–9) made the important point that chiefs’ sons underwent repeated seclusions and initiations – up to ten times – to increase their prestige. Since positions in the most important secret societies of the Bella Coola were ranked and acquired successively – with each rank requiring large payments – only individuals initiated at a young age would have a chance to pass through all the lower ranks and enter the highest ones. McIlwraith also repeatedly referred to “children” being able to enter the societies (e.g., 1948a:180), although traditionally this may have only applied to the *Sisaok*

Society of chiefs, since he was told that only those over twenty-five years old were admitted to the *Kusiut* Society in earlier times (McIlwraith 1948b:2).

Ernst (1952:12) reported that children were initiated into the Wolf Society from eight years old on and were generally pre-adolescents.

### Feasts

*Hamatsa* initiates gave or were given lavish public feasts after initiation, while secret society members often had big feasts together during the day (Boas 1897:514; Spradley 1969:92,107; Kane 1996:151). Boas (1897:514,622–9) mentioned numerous feasts in connection with the winter ceremonial initiations and dances, including nightly feasting that rotated to “every house,” involving all-night singing. Similarly, visitors were feasted every day during Nuuchahnulth winter ceremonies, although women and men apparently ate separately for some of the society feasts, even though they were all society members (Boas 1897:634,641,645). Feasting took place at the host’s house each night and for everyone in the village after the initiation (Ernst 1952:68,79; Kane 1996:151). Kenyon (1980:30) described a twenty-eight-day “Shamans’ Dance” hosted by an important chief for the initiation of Nuuchahnulth boys into the Wolf Society. This included “endless feasting.” Initiation fees were also distributed to secret society members at a “great feast” (Boas 1891:599). Coast Salish initiations involved a five-day feast that accompanied the dances (Boas 1897:643,645). The Nishga celebrated the return of novices with a feast given to the chief who helped them (Boas 1897:657). In addition, anyone who coughed or laughed during Kwakwakawakw ceremonies or who transgressed other rules could be required to give a feast to the secret society members, or the highest ranking members (Boas 1897:507,526).

The Bella Coola held feasts to open the winter ritual season, and to announce the selection of new candidates for secret society membership in the candidate’s family’s house. Feasts and gifts were also given by the candidate’s father and kin to society members at the culmination of the initiation, and feasts were given after all *Kusiut* performances as routine elements in society dances, with food that was always considered the best available (McIlwraith 1948b:32,37,47–8,54,68,257).

Feasts were given for Chinookan novices who successfully returned from their spirit quests in order to announce and celebrate the event together with their initiation into the secret society which was to follow and which was also accompanied by a feast (Ray 1938:90).

### Frequency

Among the Bella Coola, and as was probably characteristic of most groups on the Northwest Coast, the winter was the sacred time when spirits visited the earth and could be contacted by secret society members, although the Sun

Dance apparently was performed at both the winter and summer solstices as well as after eclipses (McIlwraith 1948b:222–4,234). The entire social structure changed during the winter ceremonial season so that individuals aligned themselves primarily with secret societies rather than according to kinship groups. During this time, they used only their sacred names, not their profane names. Thus, secret society rituals were an annual affair, and McIlwraith (1948b:1) claimed that the Bella Coola engaged in nightly dancing for almost three months, which is difficult to imagine given the preparations and costs involved. However, some of these were evidently minor or simpler versions of dances, with the more complex rituals like the cannibal performances only given three or four times in an individual's lifetime (McIlwraith 1948b:23). Initiations, too, were probably held, on average, at intervals of several years.

This brings to a close the documentation of important points concerning the dynamics, motivations, organization, economic foundations, ideology, and material characteristics of secret societies on the American Northwest Coast. We now turn to California where secret societies also thrived and were documented by early anthropologists.

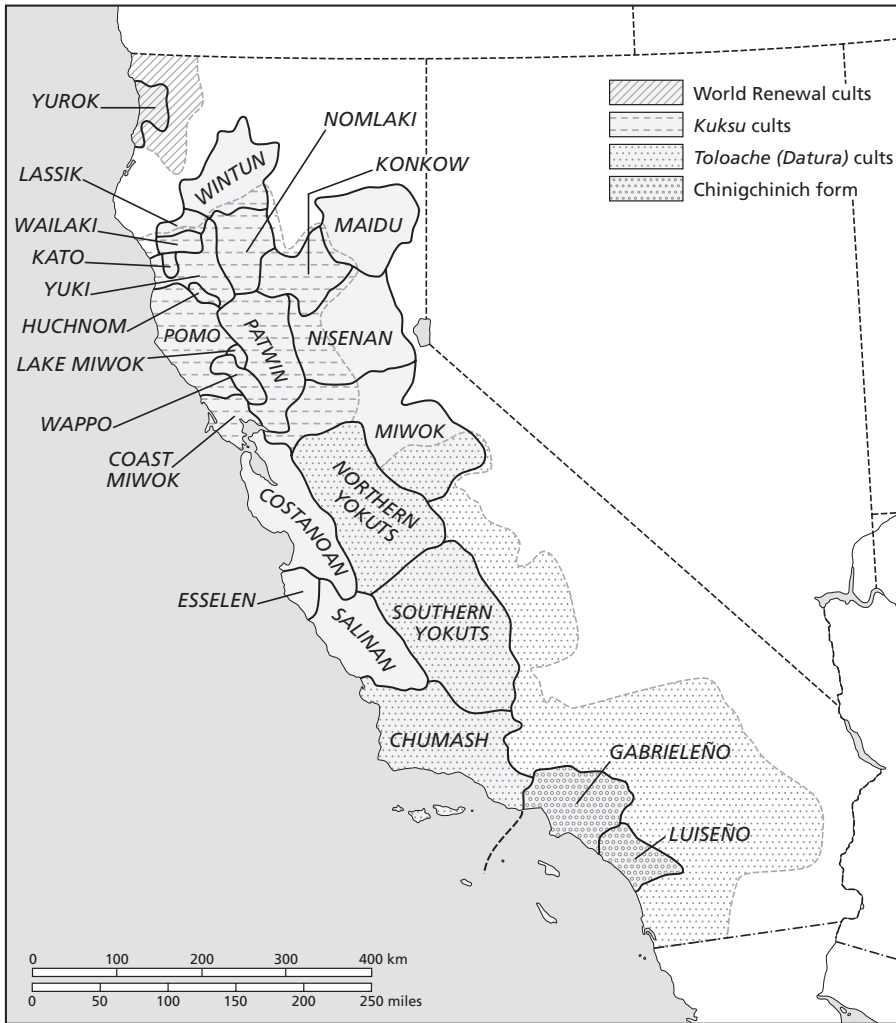
## CHAPTER THREE

### CALIFORNIA

#### INTRODUCTION

The second region where considerable detail is available about secret societies among complex hunter/gatherers is California (Fig. 3.1). As summarized by Bean and Vane (1978), there were three subareas in California of secret society developments: (1) a north coast World Renewal complex; (2) a north central area of *Kuksu* rituals; and (3) a central and southern complex featuring toloache/*Datura* (jimson weed) use (Bean and Vane 1978:663). The World Renewal complex was an extension of the Northwest Coast system with status based on wealth and reciprocal exchanges at ritual feasts. It featured a re-creation of the deeds of the Immortals at specific sites for the re-creation of the world using fire, ceremonial houses, and sweat houses (Bean and Vane 1978:663-4).

The most detailed information comes from the southern area involving the Chumash and Luiseño 'Antap Society and the northern area involving the *Kuksu* and related societies. Bean and Vane (1978) acknowledged the very complex variations of these cults so that it is difficult to make many generalizations. They vary from some clear examples of secret societies to cults that may or may not be considered secret societies. The cult organizations in the south generally focused on initiations, had few formally structured dances, and used *Datura* to enter altered states of consciousness (Kroeber 1925:857; 1932:412). Kroeber attributed the lack of elaborate costumes to this "inward-looking and mystic character" of the southern cults.



3.1 Map of the Californian ethnic groups referred to in Chapter 3.

Physical techniques for producing altered states were primarily used in the north (mainly fasting, sweating, and dancing versus the use of psychoactive substances in the south), and costumes in the north were concomitantly more elaborate. Loeb (1929:271) observed that ghosts in ceremonies only occurred in central California (which I refer to as “northern-central California”), and that clowns were often portrayed as ghosts. Kroeber (1932:399) noted that the ghost cults were mutually exclusive with mourning ceremonies, indicating that the two may have served the same socioeconomic functions (e.g., the acquisition of power, allies, displays of wealth and power) – an interpretation also endorsed by Bean and Vane (1978:666).

In the following discussion, I retain the same key topics used in Chapter 2 on the Northwest Coast secret societies. Kroeber (1932:312–13) and Loeb



(1929:249–50,286–7) discuss the distinction between secret tribal initiations and secret society initiations, the main distinction being universal initiations for all boys versus initiations of select individuals (often including girls) generally involving fees, grades, and the use of disguises in the more esoteric and dangerous activities such as those featuring the death of initiates followed by their resurrection. However, this distinction is often blurred when there is more than one type of initiation in a community and more than one grade or rank in tribal initiating organizations. It is often unclear if such situations should be regarded as a tribal initiation with added secret society initiations, or whether the tribal initiation should be considered as an entry-level grade into secret societies, with each “society” actually representing successive grades in a single overarching secret society – an interpretation made more plausible when the leaders of all the societies were the same and they all used the same dance house (Kroeber 1932:312fn). However, most often, the main ethnographers treated the societies as separate, and I will follow their lead. Where secret societies definitely existed and seemed to use secret tribal initiations as an entry level to more exclusive society memberships, I will treat these tribal initiations as extensions of the secret societies. Such secret tribal initiations-cum-entry-levels-to-secret-societies often had internal hierarchies of officers, with older members as the masters holding the most esoteric knowledge or botanical medicine knowledge as well as privileged seats in the dance house ceremonies which they had to purchase (Kroeber 1932:331–3). In these aspects, they resemble secret society organizational structures.

What the precise relationship was between the mourning ceremonies for the dead and secret societies is not clear. Mourning ceremonies occurred only in half of California, especially in the south (Gabrieleño and Luiseño, but also southern Pomo, Yuki, and Lassik; Kroeber 1925:860). Like high-ranking secret society members, “notable” good people were most prominent in mourning rituals and only they had material burned at ceremonies, often amounting to substantial wealth. At one ceremony with 150 Northern Maidu present, US\$500 (in 1900) was burned with a great deal of trading between mourners for items to burn (Dixon 1905:251–5,258). The impression is that those who held or made prestige items benefited the most and that reciprocal debts may have been involved; however, determining such aspects lies beyond the present objectives of this book.

### *General Kuksu Characteristics*

Kroeber (1925:204,365,367) described the “big head” (Kuksu) impersonator’s costume and the large, circular, earth-covered dance house with a foot drum (a board placed over a pit and struck with feet, as shown in Fig. 10 of Levy 1978:409) as the most typical features of the *Kuksu* Cult (Fig. 3.2; see also



3.2 An earth-covered Wintun ritual dance structure with a decorated sacred pole at the entrance and a society member standing in a feather cape (Barrett 1919:Plate 22(3)).

Fig. 3.5). Specifically, he noted that “the spread of the earth house as a ritualistic chamber coincides with that of the *kuksu* cult” (Kroeber 1925:365). Such ritual structures were often called “sweat houses,” and were sometimes used as such, but specialized sweat houses also existed in a number of groups but were smaller and adjacent to the ceremonial house. Some other common features of the *Kuksu* Cults included fasting for initiates (presumably to induce altered states of mind); the spearing or shooting (“killing”) of initiates (a distinctive feature of Californian secret societies according to Kroeber 1932:402); the impersonation of spirits with body painting and impressive plumed headdresses; and some kind of public appearances of the spirit impersonators in the form of either processions or performances. There were usually cult leaders accompanied by individuals in a “clown” role.

In their major synthesis of Californian religious systems, Bean and Vane (1978:665–7) summarized the *Kuksu* Cult area as “a variety of religious customs and beliefs ... interwoven to create a complex” which varied considerably. The *Kuksu* was an “open system” in which traits were exchanged with neighboring groups. “What distinguished the religion was its complexity and formalized organization rather than any given ritual feature of it. Most of

the peoples who practiced it had one or more secret societies (Ghost, *Kuksu*, *Hesi*, *Aki*)” (Bean and Vane 1978:665). In essence, these cults were societies of knowledgeable men “and occasionally women” with complex rites of passage and formal instruction that warranted the positions of leadership. The rituals included curing, singing, and dancing by elaborately costumed performers who impersonated spirits with many local variations (Bean and Vane 1978:665).

In some groups, males could not function socially without membership in at least one secret society; in other groups, members consisted only of the most powerful and wealthy. Some societies such as the *Hesi* in the Sacramento Valley were for all boys, but there were ten to twelve further ranks within the societies which all required payments (Kroeber 1925:364). Some groups merged the Ghost Society and the *Kuksu* Society or incorporated neighboring religious traits such as bear ceremonialism, creating a third, higher, level for Patwin elites.

Kroeber (1932:402,412,418) argued that the central Californian cult system was a luxury, and therefore only occurred in favorable, economically prosperous environments, with the origin probably in the Sacramento Valley. He viewed the receptivity of the *Kuksu* Society in northern California as due to the “general prosperity” of the cultures, the “bountiful subsistence,” and the high population levels. Other groups “were not in an economic or demographic position to luxuriate culturally” (Kroeber 1932:412). Costly feathered capes (Fig. 3.2), belts, and other regalia were one indication of the surpluses produced by these cultures.

Similarly, Bean and Vane (1978:663) observed that religious institutionalization (by which I believe they meant secret society organization) was “correlating markedly with economic and ecological potentials,” with the great religious systems occurring in the most favored environments, and informal religious networks occurring in areas of poor resources. Bean and Vane (1978:666) specifically noted that the most elaborate *Kuksu* Cults occurred where there were the most resources, trade, and population. They also noted that the great religious systems were “intimately involved in economic aspects” of their cultures, both in important resource production and in exchange (Bean and Vane 1978:662). These aspects were likely related to some of the underlying goals in the formation of these societies, e.g., as strategies used by aggrandizers to extend or expand their sociopolitical control based on surplus production as proposed by political ecological models. As such, secret societies are only expected to have occurred in surplus-producing contexts.

The *Kuksu*, like the ghost societies, were considered to be “dangerous,” and it was necessary to pay for instruction needed for higher offices, positions that were frequently hereditary (Kroeber 1932:315,323,397). Many *Kuksu* Cults

featured ghost ceremonialism involving death and resurrection with the use of the bullroarer plus a masked “doctor” god, all combined into a “shamanic” type of secret society (Loeb 1932:96,231).

Some ethnic groups appear to have separated the ghost and *Hesi* organizations from secret societies, although Kroeber (1925:433,435) seemed to treat them as all part of *Kuksu* secret societies. The *Hesi* Society was only found in the Sacramento Valley, included most males, and was more dance-oriented than esoteric or power-oriented. It was described as “gentle” rather than “dangerous” (Kroeber 1932:329), although this seems at variance with subsequent descriptions by Kroeber (336). The *Hesi* Society also had four grades of members (329). The aspects of secret societies with medicine men who impersonated a culture hero and demonstrated supernatural control over fire and snakes, and climbed poles, were suggested to have come from the south (Kroeber 1932:404; Loeb 1933:229).

### *Age, Origin, and Dynamics of Cults*

Bean and Vane (1978:662) thought that all the major religious systems in California (*Kuksu*, World Renewal, and *Toloache* Cults) had their roots in shamanism, developing possibly one or two thousand, or even several thousand years before contact (Bean and Vane 1978:665). Hollimon (2004:53–4), Gamble (2012:183,188) and Corbett (2004) all concurred that archaeological bullroarers and whistles probably indicate the prehistoric existence of the ‘*Antap*’ or similar organization. What distinguished them from shamanism was the formal education and wealth requirements as criteria for adopting roles, resulting in a more priest-like office (Bean and Vane 1978:663).

The western variants of the *Kuksu* (described in Loeb 1932) were thought to be a more archaic form of the cult (Loeb 1933:227). Those *Kuksu* Cults combined ghost ceremonialism, featured death and resurrection with the use of the bullroarer, and incorporated a masked “doctor” god into shamanic types of secret societies (Loeb 1932:96,231).

Loeb (1929:249; 1933:228) thought that secret societies developed from secret tribal initiations and that archaic tribal initiation characteristics included the use of bullroarers (as spirit voices), the impersonation or representation of spirits, death, and resurrection of initiates, and some form or permanent physical marking of them. Alternatively, he suggested that these features derived from shamanism combined with ghost ceremonies (Loeb 1933:268–9).

Kroeber (1932:417) also reconstructed the archaic form of secret societies from boys’ initiations featuring fetish bundles, bullroarers, the impersonation of ghosts, and powerful spirits that were able to cure sickness (somewhat similar

to the fairies or ghosts of the European Calusari and other ritual groups that might be considered as secret societies; see Chapter 11).

In terms of geographical origins, Kroeber (1932:254) thought that the *Kuksu* Society developed in the Patwin area of the Sacramento Valley where it is most elaborate, with more kinds of dances, more ranks, and more variants of secret societies. Loeb (1932:132,134) thought that many traits of *Kuksu* and northern-central California cults originated from the American Southwest, e.g., pole climbing, rattlesnake ceremonies, new fire ceremonies, and the sacrifice of meal. On the other hand, characteristics similar to Northwest Coast secret societies included bear ceremonialism, possession of novices, and masked deities. The aspects of a secret society of medicine men who impersonated a culture hero, demonstrated supernatural control over fire or snakes, and climbed poles were suggested to have come from the south (Loeb 1933:229). The *Hesi* ceremony was thought to have originated in the north, with its ownership of and payment for dances plus bear doctors or dancers (Loeb 1933:229).

## OVERVIEW

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

There is little in the California ethnographies that explicitly deals with motives for organizing or joining secret societies. Powers (1877, cited in Barrett 1917:404) maintained that the secret societies' "simple purpose is to conjure up infernal terrors and render each other assistance in keeping their women in subjection." Some ethnologists dismiss this claim, noting that there were female as well as male initiates and that the society had no important function in guarding the virtue of women contra the claims of Powers. Thus, Powers' claim was dismissed by later anthropologists, but is echoed by similar comments about the aims of secret societies in Melanesia and Africa (Chapters 7 and 9).

As already noted, Kroeber (1932:402,412,418) and others observed that the secret societies of central California occurred in prosperous environments, and should be considered as luxuries. They therefore make good sense as originating as part of surplus-based aggrandizer strategies to increase the benefits and power of proponents. For this reason, various secret society cults were fluid and diffused easily to surplus-producing communities.

**Wealth acquisition**

Members of secret societies could acquire great wealth and power. In addition to initiation fees, which could be substantial, societies exacted goods from the public for ceremonial feasts like first fruits ceremonies. Doctoring by secret society members cost as much as patients could pay. Goods were sold to people participating in mourning ceremonies. Dances were taught for a fee. Costumes had to be purchased. Dancers and spirit impersonators demanded payments from spectators. And advancing in the society involved payments to those in upper ranks.

**Political Connections**

It was common for the head of the main secret society to be the political headman, or “chief,” of a community, or at least for headmen and elites to work in close collaboration with high-ranking secret society members.

*Tactics***Ideology and Esoteric Knowledge**

Throughout California, dealing with spirit power was claimed to be dangerous and such power was generally portrayed as being obtained from animal spirits. Cessation of secret society rituals was claimed to result in catastrophes. In southern California, secret society members claimed that celestial bodies governed everything on the earth and that members could travel to the stars and influence the celestial spheres. Their rituals were claimed to be critical for the continuation of life and they guarded their ritual knowledge as a secret, especially astronomical information. Esoteric astronomical or calendrical knowledge (based on astronomy) was a common feature. Misfortunes were portrayed as resulting from disobeying the gods or transgressions of the many ritual rules of the societies or communities, as well as being caused by affronts to leaders. In some areas, secret society members were called “shamans,” although this was not the case in other areas. Nevertheless, the heads of secret societies were often shamans. In northern California, shamans claimed that they had to act according to their guardian spirit wishes, and thus they were not responsible for their actions or were above normal morality.

**Benefits and Threats to Communities**

In southern California, secret societies claimed that the world was constantly threatened by destructive cosmic forces which the society could keep under control and thereby safeguard their communities. Members also claimed to be able to cure sicknesses and held competitive displays to rid villages of diseases. Members could inflict sicknesses as well as cure

them, but also could bring rain, kill enemies, and increase game. In the central and northern areas, secret society members similarly provided cures, although marauding “were-bears” could terrorize communities with bear impersonators killing at whim. The societies claimed to be able to protect against such attacks.

### **Exclusiveness and Ranking**

In southern and central California, only elites were admitted to the main secret societies which had between three and twelve successive degrees. Related to these levels were a number of specialized roles (sometimes twelve or more), such as jesters, watchers, callers, and drummers. In some areas of the north, only 10 percent of the population were secret society members while in other areas almost the entire male population were members at least at entry levels.

### **Initiation Costs**

As in other culture areas, fees for entering secret societies varied considerably, probably reflecting differences in importance and power in different regions and of different societies. However, an entry level fee of about US\$13 (1932 dollars) seems average, with some paying “heavily” and others paying little.

### **Public Displays of Wealth and Supernatural Power**

Public displays of supernatural powers seem to have been more or less universal in Californian secret societies, usually with elaborate costuming and trappings. Such displays included dances, processions displaying wealth, masked or costumed and face/body-painted performances (Fig. 3.2), various tricks and acrobatics, swallowing rattlesnakes, fire blazing from members’ hair, putting burning coals in mouths, shamanic power battles, and death and resurrection enactments.

### **Ecstatic States**

In southern California, *Datura* was used by secret society elites for vision quests to obtain supernatural power. Some groups also smoked tobacco until they passed out in order to contact spirits. In other parts of California, fasting, darkness, sweating, extended periods of singing, drumming, and dancing resulted in initiates acting frenzied, possessed, crazy, and ultimately passing out. Initiates were confronted by spirits and were ritually “killed,” then revived.

### **Enforcement**

Killing of those who profaned a secret society was widespread. In the north, this was sometimes done by “were-bears” (society members



wearing bear costumes). People were pressured or threatened to contribute to ritual gatherings, and society members claimed to be able to kill or sicken their enemies with their supernatural powers and esoteric knowledge. Bear impersonators could kill at whim, presumably targeting mainly anyone who threatened the secret society, its ideology, or its claims.

### **Sacrifices and Cannibalism**

In contrast to other culture areas, there appears to have been very little reported human sacrifice or cannibalism in Californian secret societies, with only one reference to secret society members in southern California as “eaters of human flesh.” However, given the widespread threats of killing for secret society transgressions and the relatively common Californian practice of scalping and taking of human body parts as trophies (Lambert 2007), it may be premature to dismiss human sacrifice as absent from Californian secret societies.

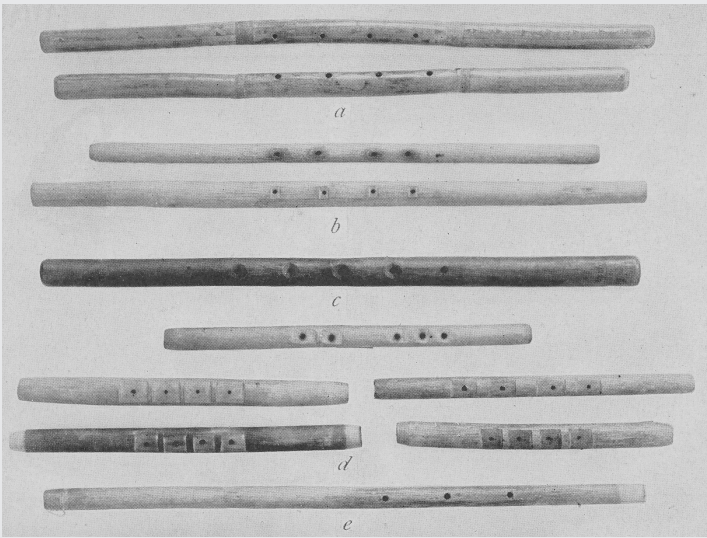
### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia and Structures**

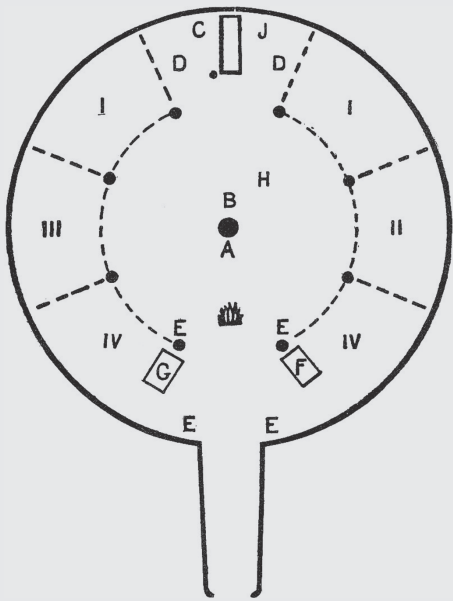
In northern California, paraphernalia included foot drums, scratching sticks, sucking tubes, bullroarers, long flint or curved obsidian blades, shells, horns, hooves, beads, horn or shell spoons, bone pins, flutes, and whistles (Fig. 3.3). Some groups used mortars only for making acorn meal used in ritual feasts. Southern secret societies used some of these items as well as turtle shell rattles, crystals, stone bowls, pipes, and sacred bundles with claws, beaks, and arrows (or perhaps arrow points).

In north and central California, the semi-subterranean earth-covered dance or sweat house was the standard structure used for secret society rituals (Figs. 3.4–3.7; see also Fig. 3.2). This is a very different pattern from the Northwest Coast where special ritual structures do not seem to have existed in early historic times. The dance/sweat houses varied considerably in use and function, with separate structures sometimes used by ritual heads or for sweat baths or ritual preparations, while at the other extreme, a single structure served multiple functions: for dancing, steam bathing, as men’s clubhouses, or even winter residences. In one group, entire communities were said to live in some ritual structures during winter months. It was most common for these structures to be located among the village houses, although in some areas only the most important villages had dance houses. In other cases, ritual structures were located 100 meters or more from the village. Many groups used separate





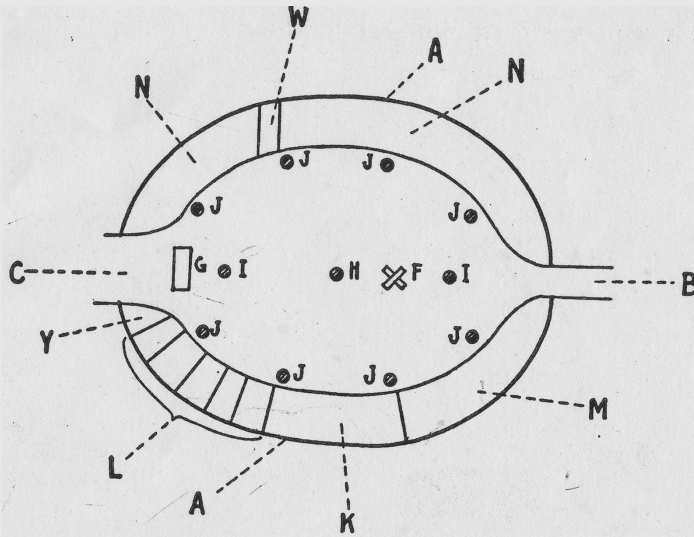
3.3 Bone flutes used to represent the voices of spirits in Californian secret society rituals (Kroeber 1925:Plate 43).



3.4 A floor plan of a Pomo ritual dance structure. The Roman numerals refer to sections for visitors and village residents. A is the center pole, B the place of singers, C the place of drummers, D for resting dancers, E the place of fire tenders, F and G are wood piles, H is the ritual leader, and J is the place of ghost spirits (Barrett 1916:15, Fig. 3).

locations (c. 200–300 meters from the village) for initiations; some of these had ritual structures, dance areas, and camping areas. Decorated poles were often important ritual features of structures.

Mountain tops, or other places where spirits resided, and caves or rock shelters were also used for initiations, rituals, and for storing ritual paraphernalia. The ritual “structures” in southern California were also



3.5 A floor plan of a Patwin semi-subterranean ritual dance structure. Note the two entrances. A is the wall, B and C are entrances, F is the fireplace, G is the foot drum, H is the center post, I and J are other posts, K is the place for the chief and main performers, L is for the *saltu* (Ghost dance) performers, M is for singers and entertainers, N is for non-participants, W is a place for the *wai-saltu*, Y is occupied by the *yampu* (shaman) (Loeb 1933:210, Fig. 1).

primarily located within villages, but only consisted of fenced, open-air areas and open-air sanctuaries surrounded by dancing and camping grounds. Also of interest are the observations of unusual cleanliness at ritual shrines (Fig. 3.7), even though food processing and craft manufacturing took place at them.

### Burials

Little information is available on the burial of secret society members, other than a few references to their cremation, and of them having the most elaborate mourning rituals.

### Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Organization

Hereditary roles were common in secret society organizations in California, thus ensuring that all important kinship groups were represented in these organizations. There were also ample observations indicating that members cooperated on a regional, even inter-tribal, level, at least with several neighboring groups. It is possible that the permanent physical marking or scarification commonly used in secret society initiations was to reliably identify membership claimants as bona fide initiates in areas where they were not personally known. The common occurrence of the same power animals – especially the bear,



3.6 The inside of a semi-subterranean Pomo ritual dance structure with decorated posts and roofing slats (Barrett 1916:Plate 7).

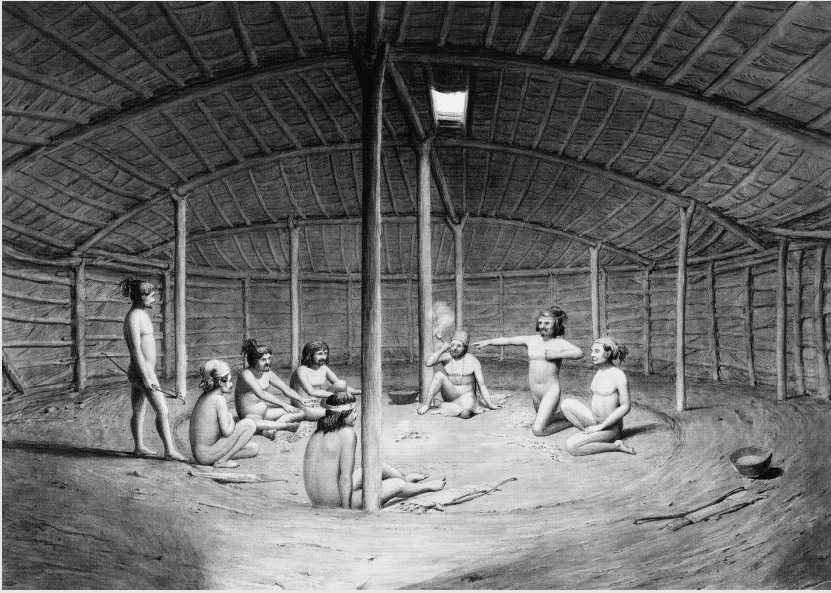
but also coyotes and raptors – may reflect these regional interactions, as may regional art styles.

### **Number of Societies and Proportion of Population**

In southern California, there appears to have been only one secret society, whereas in central California, there could be three in large villages. The proportion of village populations involved in secret societies varied considerably from only a few elites to the entire male population, at least for entry-level initiations. In the case of general memberships, higher levels became progressively restricted.

### **Age of Initiation and Sex**

Boys generally were initiated into secret societies between the ages of six and twelve years old, although full initiation might take another decade or two. There was great variability in the role of women in secret societies. In some groups they were entirely prohibited, in some they could be members but had restricted roles, and in some they participated fully.



3.7 This is perhaps the only image of a ritual dance house in California with individuals engaged in activities within it. The drawing is by Henry Brown depicting the interior of a Konkow dance house c. 1851, titled “Chinoh Council House, Group Gambling near Munroeveille, Sac. River.” Permission to use this image is courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

At least in one case, an early observer claimed that the main purpose of the secret society was to terrorize women.

### **Feasts**

Feasting was common after most dancing performances, shamanic competitions, and initiations as well as for new secret society leaders. Acorn bread and acorn soup were special feasting foods.

### **Frequency**

Secret society dances and seasonal ceremonies could be held yearly or more frequently, whereas initiations appear to have been held only every few years, even every ten to twelve years.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

### *Core Features*

### **Motives and Dynamics**

Powers (1877, cited in Barrett 1917:404) stated that the secret society’s “simple purpose is to conjure up infernal terrors and render each other assistance in



keeping their women in subjection.” This was called into question by Barrett and others (see “Sex”), but there are few other statements explicitly examining motives for organizing or joining secret societies. Even if true, such motives could be subsumed under the broad motives of acquiring power, which can be expected from ambitious aggrandizers.

However, in terms of dynamics, there are a number of statements concerning the lively, dynamic exchange and purchasing of secret society rituals and paraphernalia between groups. Dances and ceremonies spread from one village to another via purchase of rituals including instruction (Kroeber 1932:340). The Wailaki introduced a new dance with “dangerous” costumes which was “bought” from another group (Loeb 1932:75). Kroeber (1925:371) notes that the *Kuksu* Cult was adopted by a number of distinct linguistic/cultural groups including the Yuki, Pomo, Wintun, Maidu, Miwok, Costanoan, Esselen, Salinan, and some Athabascan and Yokuts groups. While no single organization or leadership may have been established across all these groups, several ethnic groups do seem to have participated in the same regional network. The spread and continuing interactions and exchange of secret society rituals, paraphernalia, ideology, and iconography plausibly provide the dynamics behind archaeological “interaction spheres.”

### Sources of Wealth

Although Hudson and Underhay (1978:144) provide no specifics, they noted that control of astronomical knowledge and the calendar provided great wealth and power to the Chumash ‘*Antap*’ shaman/priests. In addition, Boscani (1978:71) noted that curing by society members was well paid, while Gamble (2008:197–8, 225, 279) emphasized that people attending ceremonies had to pay so that the sponsoring of ceremonies and dances brought in wealth for the organizers, and that the chief (a member of the ‘*Antap*’) exacted goods for ceremonial feasts which he used to pay specialists (e.g., singers, dancers, and other specialists) but which he and the ‘*Antap*’ benefited from as well. “Shamans,” presumably ‘*Antap*’ members, used poisons or threats of poisoning to increase their power and wealth.

Among the coastal Pomo, chiefs who were members of the *Kuksu* Society were given a great deal of food and wealth (Loeb 1926:355). Initiates were given belts and necklaces of beads (Loeb 1926:270, 359).

People had to pay Kato native doctors “as much as they could afford” for cures (Loeb 1932:36).

In addition, the head of the secret society among the Maidu received gifts from those participating in mourning ceremonies which were major trading, social, political, and feasting events. The secret society head was also in charge of selling mourners strings of beads to be burned at the ceremonies (Loeb 1933:155). Food was demanded from each Yuba River Maidu household for the first fruits ceremony, and it was given to secret society members in the dance house. Chico

Maidu sacred dances, costumes, and even animal or other spirits were all privately owned and acquiring them involved payments (Loeb 1933:194).

Valley Maidu *Hesi* initiates had to pay leaders “heavily” (Kroeber 1932:384), and grizzly bear spirit impersonators demanded large payments or threatened people (Kroeber 1932:381). Northern Maidu dancers presented sticks (representing each household) to the chief as a demand for payment which took the form of beads, feathers, or other property; dance leaders were secret society members (Dixon 1905:286,289,295–6,309). Members paid heavily for the positions that they took over, such as bear dancers (296). Shamans, who were probably society members, were paid large sums to kill people (Dixon 1905:269) and, presumably, to cure them.

There were fees to learn ceremonies and to attend dances which were divided among members, with the chief apparently getting a large share for the Patwin Ghost dances (*Wai-saltu*). The society head was paid 2,400 beads to instruct his successor (Kroeber 1932:317–18). The Colusa Patwin had to pay 320 beads (about US\$4 in 1933 or before) for learning each of five impersonations in the secret society, while spectators paid those who impersonated the spirits, and presumably also paid for curing the sick (Loeb 1933:210–12). People who participated in dances had to pay a fathom of beads (Kroeber 1932:321). Dancers in *Hesi* ceremonies were paid, the head spirit owner was paid by spectators, and spectators paid for special performances. Spectators also had to pay for seats (331,333–4,336). In *Kuksu* (and other) performances, the main spirit impersonator placed a pile of sticks before the dance organizer or chief with one stick representing each spectator in attendance. Spectators were then obligated to give payment to the chief, with spirit displeasure being expressed dramatically by throwing fire around if payments were considered insufficient (338,377). Shamans were paid US\$30–40 (in 1932) for curing serious illnesses (285). People desiring to adopt dances and ceremonies in different villages also paid US\$4 (in 1932) to the heads of societies for rights and instructions (340). The head of Hill Patwin ceremonies directed all households to bring food, firewood, and supplies for the ceremonies (345).

Yurok shamans and the dancers whom they “shot” dead (and then revived) were paid, presumably in shell beads (Gayton 1948:131). Guests from other villages provided gifts to the Wintun organizers of *Hesi* ceremonies (Barrett 1919:456).

In the World Renewal Cults, performers representing Immortals were paid (Bean and Vane 1978:664).

### Political Connections

In their synthesis of Californian religion, Bean and Vane (1978:662) state that

in most of the groups that participated in these networks [World Renewal, *Kuksu*, or *Toloache* Cults], initiation into religious secret societies was

a sine qua non for elite or leadership status ... Entry into and status within these religious societies usually correlated with the wealth and the social background of an individual as well as his or her social, intellectual, and technological skills ... These religious-political leaders served as administrators and statesmen of early California.

Leaders in *Kuksu* Cults generally also held high-ranking positions in secular organizations (Bean and Vane 1978:666). Pomo "chiefs" and members of the secret society chose *Kuksu* initiates, and the chief presided over their initiation (Loeb 1932:4). The chief also directed and instructed Kato *Kuksu* initiates (29–30). Chiefs were always members of the Clear Lake Pomo secret society and were intimately connected with it (Gifford 1926:354,360). The Maidu political head was the head of the secret society (Loeb 1933:148). Among the Yuba River Maidu the head of the secret society was also the village chief (185). Chico Maidu spirit impersonators conferred abundant fish, acorns, and other harvests on the chief during their performances (195). Members of the Northern Maidu secret societies had considerable power and position; leaders were also leaders of the community and tribe; they regulated dances, served as war leaders, and settled disputes (Dixon 1905:323,328,332). The head of the secret society among the foothills Maidu also served as the community chief (locating the best acorn groves, inflicting sickness on foes, making rain, ensuring good harvests, leading war parties) (Kroeber 1925:374).

### *Tactics*

#### **Ideology**

In terms of the World Renewal Cults, Bean and Vane (1978:663–4) report that floods, earthquakes, fires, diseases, and accidents were considered as due to improper actions of humans and as manifestations of the displeasure of supernatural forces for which "only the performance of appropriate rites could restore the world to an orderly and predictable state" via rituals that had been established by the Immortals at the time of creation. Only the World Renewal priests knew these esoteric and secret rites. Dead shamans, leaders, and people of high status were claimed to reside in the heavens with the Immortals, while other deceased people remained in a poor underworld (Bean and Vane 1978:665).

The 'Antap affected all aspects of Chumash society in southern California. In elite rhetoric, the 'Antap was portrayed as benefiting and protecting the entire community. Supernatural knowledge and power was portrayed as dangerous but necessary for success and of more importance than practical abilities, chance, or family help. Celestial bodies governed events on earth and 'Antap Society members claimed to have access to the celestial beings and to be able to influence them; nothing was due to chance (Hudson and Underhay



1978). Affronts to the chief were said to jeopardize the entire village, resulting in spirits sending plagues or misfortunes (Boscana 1978:43). During dances or rituals, members of the '*Antap* society were supposed to travel to the stars where they obtained their supernatural powers and paraphernalia. They also became stars after death (Boscana 1978:30,57,77).

Thus, the '*Antap* members developed highly sophisticated astronomical knowledge and an accurate calendar which they claimed gave them an understanding of (and influence over) celestial systems and cosmic equilibria. The phases of the moon were supposed to affect all life, while the solstices were portrayed as dangerous periods during which the rituals of the astronomers were critical for life and death. Perils constantly were said to threaten communities, but these were avoidable by the proper use of rituals and paraphernalia. Misfortunes, infirmities, and death were considered retributions for people disobeying the gods. These ideological features were used to justify elite rights of power over common people. The chief supervised secret society ceremonies and all important rituals; the "sun priest" was described as the master astronomer who led major rituals and may have been considered a chief as well. All of the "power" knowledge was kept secret and not shared with commoners (Hudson and Underhay 1978:16,30,32,38,43,57,77,100,126,129,130,141-5). Curing techniques and knowledge of the calendar were the exclusive domains of society members (Boscana 1978:65,71).

The spirit healer among the Kato was "Big Head," the moon (Loeb 1932:22). Spirits, whistles (voices of spirits), ceremonies, and training were all portrayed as very dangerous, especially for women (32,45).

The Maidu secret societies considered the bear as a member of their cult (Loeb 1933:142). "Lucky" members of the secret societies hosted feasts for protection from bears, to obtain the favor of spirits, to promote productive harvests, and to prevent sickness (146,194). There were also many behavioral and social proscriptions and prescriptions which, if not followed, were claimed to cause sickness which only secret society members could cure (155). Power was claimed to be obtained from guardian spirits in the form of animals or "fabulous monsters" which were largely inherited by "singing doctors" (secret society members), with the main singing doctor possessing or controlling many spirit helpers (Loeb 1933:161,163,180; Dixon 1905:281). The "luck" that some people had was portrayed as coming from the help they obtained from their guardian spirits (Loeb 1933:160). The calendar appears to have been very important either for esoteric ideological reasons or for practical reasons (such as the scheduling of feasts) since there were calendar disputes that resulted in fighting between villages (145). Northern Maidu shamans claimed that they only acted according to the directives of their spirit allies and that if they did not do what the spirits demanded, they (the shamans) would die (Dixon 1905:281) – a convenient justification for doing potentially unpopular

or self-serving things. Like the Maidu, leaders of the Northern Maidu secret societies took credit for good seasons and harvests, as well as for driving away sickness and evil, bringing rain, and causing enemy deaths (Dixon 1905:331–2; Loeb 1933:180). The Ghost (*Wai-saltu*) ceremonies were held in part to increase acorn yields (Kroeber 1932:320).

The Colusa Patwin considered that the spirits contacted by secret society members could cure the sick and increase food harvests (Loeb 1933:211–12). In general, Kroeber (1925:373) said that some of the spirits being impersonated were represented as so dangerous and powerful that mistakes in the performances could kill the impersonators. The principal *Hesi* spirit owners claimed to be “dangerous,” but their powers could cure the sick and provide for people’s well-being (Kroeber 1932:336–7). Hill Patwin initiates were said to be able to “do anything” (Kroeber 1932:346).

The director of *Hesi* performances among the Wintun adopted a high-pitched voice when he was supposed to be in communication with the keeper of the abode of the dead. In that role (as the *moki*), the director delivered instructions from the other world as to what people had to do, and how they had to conduct themselves in order to be given an abundance of food. The instructions included mythological justifications for why the world existed in its current state and why that should be maintained. The director supposedly also transmitted requests to spirits for community well-being (Barrett 1919:452,462–3).

In general, any cessation of secret society activities was traditionally portrayed as resulting in a major catastrophe. In contemporary times, proper rituals and ceremonies were claimed to nourish the earth, provide good hunting, bring rains and abundant crops as well as avert epidemics, floods, and other disasters (Kroeber 1925:383–4). Initiations were supposed to confer material benefits in making boys healthy, strong, and long-lived.

### **Esoteric Knowledge**

In addition to the preceding observations, Bean and Vane (1978:664) characterize the World Renewal rituals of priests and their narratives of the Immortals (with the “power to re-create what the Immortals had originally done”) as esoteric and secret.

Hudson and Underhay (1978) devote an entire volume to the esoteric astronomical knowledge of the Chumash.

Among the Pomo, Loeb (1926:162,229) reported that astronomical knowledge was esoteric and “in the hands of the head of the secret society” who watched the heavens in order to help calculate the calendar and led ceremonies together with other secret society members.

In Wintun *Hesi* songs and speeches, some of the terms used were esoteric with meanings known only to the initiated (Barrett 1919:460).

Patwin songs were also sung in a partly esoteric language so that specific meanings could not be understood by the uninitiated (Kroeber 1925:389). Old men kept calendars with sticks stored in the sweat houses, and they argued over such matters (Kroeber 1932:284–5). In the Sacramento Valley, Bean and Vane (1978:667) also mention that esoteric knowledge was needed to direct dances, but not necessarily to perform them.

Northern Maidu leaders of secret societies were taught how to tell the hour of the night from constellations, as well as being able to communicate with spirits (Dixon 1905:330).

### **Conferring of the “Shaman” Title on All Members: The Emergence of Priestly Roles**

Overall, Bean and Vane (1978:662–3) noted that while the three great religious systems (World Renewal, *Kuksu*, and *Toloache* Cults) had their roots in shamanism, their members all had “more priestlike roles for religious specialists” in that they generally obtained their knowledge from formal education rather than personal callings.

All of the members of the ‘*Antap* Society of the Chumash were supposedly shamans possessing clairvoyance, magical powers, and magical flight abilities (Hudson and Underhay 1978:32).

Among the coastal Pomo, people became shamans by being initiated into the secret society and even priestly-like secret society members obtained some shamanistic training (Loeb 1926:320,355). In contrast, among the interior Pomo, shamans occupied separate roles and secret society members resembled priests who acquired healing powers by inheriting (and probably purchasing) medicine bags, or “outfits” (Loeb 1932:7). Southeast Pomo *Kuksu* members all had “outfit” (medicine) bags for curing (Loeb 1932:125).

For the Wappo, all members of the *Kuksu* Society were called “doctor” (i.e., shaman), even though not all could cure (Loeb 1932:109).

Like a number of other central Californian groups, the Maidu distinguished between “sucking doctors” and “singing doctors.” The sucking doctors were more experientially based and relied on their own abilities, whereas the singing doctors inherited their roles and paraphernalia, relying more on ritual, songs, and paraphernalia (outfits or medicine bags) for healing efficacy (Loeb 1933:159). In this respect, singing or outfit doctors were more like priests than shamans, although often referred to as shamans. Northern Maidu heads of secret societies (and probably other members) were also represented as powerful shamans (Dixon 1905:272).

Patwin shamans were trained by purchasing knowledge, usually from kinship members, but did not obtain abilities from visions. They were, therefore, more like priests (Kroeber 1932:285,342).

### Benefits and Threats to the Community

Bean and Vane (1978:665) concluded that whatever the stated goals were of the secret societies, such as curing or regulating various economic activities like salmon harvests, the primary function of secret societies was administrative, by which I believe they meant political control.

As indicated in the discussion of ideology, “only the performance of appropriate rites could restore the world to an orderly and predictable state” (Bean and Vane 1978:663–4), and in northern California, only the World Renewal priests knew these esoteric and secret rites.

‘*Antap* members among the Chumash claimed that communities were constantly in peril from celestial and other forces against which the ‘*Antap* Society protected the community. Members also claimed to have curing powers and to benefit the entire community (Hudson and Underhay 1978:33,142–5).

Patwin *Kuksu* members claimed that they could provide critical benefits such as restoring individuals to life (Kroeber 1925:385) and curing people of insanity (Kroeber 1932:315–16). *Hesi* members said that they could cure the sick and provide for people’s well-being via their spirit helpers, although the principal spirit owners were “dangerous” (Kroeber 1932:336–7). The basic premise of the River Patwin *Kuksu* Society was that the association with supernatural beings was dangerous. Bears were also imitated and were considered dangerous and intimidating (Gamble 2012:185,192). *Kuksu* members “shot” new initiates (potentially a veiled threat against others) who fell down “dead,” but could also be revived, although it usually took months to recover from the experience.

Pomo bear shaman/warriors could kill at whim (Loeb 1932:85) and so could terrorize communities. Pomo *Kuksu* members were nevertheless portrayed as health givers and curers and presumably protectors against bear attacks (Loeb 1929:268).

The Southern Pomo predominantly featured the promotion of harvests (Loeb 1932:102,109,118). Southeast Pomo *Kuksu* members all had “outfit” (medicine) bags for curing (125), while Wappo and Coast Miwok *Kuksu* dances were primarily for healing.

Kato “doctors” could shoot sickness into enemies (and probably others) and were considered dangerous (Loeb 1932:39). Bear skins were also worn by some doctors to kill enemies (40). “Schooling,” or training in rituals and ceremonies, was portrayed as dangerous, especially to women (32).

Wailaki doctors could inflict sickness or death on people and so were feared (Loeb 1932:83).

Maidu secret society members were active in curing (see also “Ideology,” “Public Displays of Power and Wealth”). As “singing doctors,” they often worked together with “sucking doctors” (Loeb 1933:155,161). Competitions displaying supernatural powers were also supposed to rid the villages of diseases. Society members held public ceremonies for good harvests and preventing

sickness (140,146–7,161–3). The Yuba River Maidu secret society members claimed to control spirits and harvests and held dances for abundance and protection from bears or alternatively impersonated bears that could threaten people (180,182,194). The Northern Maidu secret societies drove away evil and sickness, killed enemies in other villages, brought rain and good harvests, and even tried to recruit “bad Indians” in order to better control them for the good of the community and undoubtedly to benefit themselves (Dixon 1905:324,331). Animal dances were held in order to increase the numbers of animals or to pacify dangerous animals (Dixon 1905:285; Loeb 1933:194). Winter dances to ensure an abundance of food, the favor of spirits, and protection from bears were held by the Chico Maidu, presumably organized by the secret society (Loeb 1933:194).

A series of Wintun *Hesi* dances was supposed to ensure plentiful wild harvests, prosperity, and good health for people (Barrett 1919:438). In contrast, Yuki ghost initiates worked harm on people – at least those from other tribes (Kroeber 1925:187).

### **Exclusivity and Ranking**

The wealth, social background, and skills needed to enter the California secret societies as summarized by Bean and Vane (1978:662) has already been alluded to (see “Political Connections”). Thus, members of the cults felt socially, politically, and economically superior to non-members (Bean and Vane 1978:665).

Among the Chumash, only the most powerful men and women in the highest political and religious ranks, the elites, could be initiated into the ‘*Antap* Society or become one of the twelve astronomer officials of the society (Boscana 1978:41; Hudson and Underhay 1978:32,145). Initiations involved high membership fees, primarily in the form of shell bead wealth, which Gamble (2008:196,301) has characterized as the “cornerstone of secret religious organizations” for the Chumash, Patwin, and Pomo. Membership in the Southeast Pomo *Kuksu* Society was restricted and loosely hereditary (Loeb 1932:127). The chief and members of the Pomo *Kuksu* Society chose initiates and did not include all boys (4). Of interest in these respects are several prehistoric burials in these areas with approximately 30,000 shell beads each (Gamble 2008:220,296).

Chumash and River Patwin societies were only open to wealthy elites (Gamble 2012:188), and were internally ranked into three grades (Gamble 2012:185). The Colusa Patwin also had three initiations for full membership in their secret society (Loeb 1933:208), although the Patwin *Hesi* Society had four grades and some men went through twelve successive “degrees,” each involving instruction and payments leading to a new spirit impersonation (Kroeber 1925:329,371,373,386). Kroeber also stated that the head of the society in each locality had “enormous responsibilities and privileges.”

The Kato “doctors school” for secret society initiates was only for select boys from better families about seventeen to eighteen years old (28). Training lasted for four to six months (31).

The Maidu only initiated between two and twelve fully grown men (eighteen to twenty-five years old) into their secret society every ten to twelve years, indicating a fairly select group of members at this level. Not all boys were initiated at lower levels either (Loeb 1933:165,167). Shamans selected boys for initiation as revealed to them by spirits among the Northern Maidu (Dixon 1905:325). An interesting variant on the exclusivity and power of secret society members among the Yuba River Maidu was the keeping of prostitutes in the dance house all winter long, during which all men had sex with them (Loeb 1933:183). The Chico Maidu secret society had three grades (Loeb 1933:192). The Valley Maidu secret society members selected men to be initiated (twenty-five to thirty years old) and captured them (Kroeber 1932:376).

Organizers and hosts of the World Renewal rituals had to be wealthy owing to the high costs of holding the events (Bean and Vane 1978:664).

### Offices and Roles

In addition to the ritual leader, dancers or performers, and curers – all almost universal roles in secret societies – a number of specialized roles were also recorded. These were probably related to relative ranks and hierarchies within the societies.

*Kuksu* Societies had at least three ranks (novice, ordinary initiated, and leaders) as well as numerous specific roles. Kato *Kuksu* ceremonies were presided over by the chief, assisted by “clowns” and ghosts (Loeb 1932:26). The bear role was a third specialized level for Patwin elites (Bean and Vane 1978:666). In the Sacramento Valley, the *Hesi* Society entry level was for all boys, but there were ten to twelve subsequent ranks that all required payments (Bean and Vane 1978:666). Offices in the *Hesi* Society of the Patwin included drummers, singers, fire monitors, shouters, clowns, messengers, dancers, dance or spirit owners, and older members knowledgeable in esoterica or botanical lore (Kroeber 1932:331–5). These were probably similar for most northern and central Californian secret society organizations. The Wintun *Hesi* ceremonies had directors, singers, drummers, fire tenders, clowns, and dancers, food preparers (women) and servers (men) (Barrett 1919:461).

Pomo and Yuki dance managers were called “stone carriers” (Kroeber 1925:383). Gifford (1926:354) lists ten specialized roles for the Clear Lake Pomo including ash ghosts, whirlers of bullroarers, flag carriers, pole carriers, pole climbers, *Kuksu*, bear dancers, and four other spirit impersonators. It is surprising that he does not mention fire tenders, policing roles, cooks, servers, leaders, or drummers/musicians. He provides a list of roles in his Table 25 (Gifford 1926:363).

Maidu secret society heads were assisted by two or three “clowns,” a role somewhat like court jesters, as spokesmen and keepers of order. There were also singers, a chief’s representative, callers, watchers to ensure proper ceremonial procedures and propriety, drummers, dancers, directors, a “sucking doctor” (who acted like a village chief), and the principal “singing doctor,” who acted as the main leader and was the head of the secret society (Loeb 1933:149,166). There was also an important “doctor” and a “medium” who kept the calendar and set the dance dates as with the Yuba River Maidu (Loeb 1933:145,185). Northern Maidu society members had plume sticks to indicate their rank in the society; however, no details about ranks were provided (Dixon 1905:255).

Kroeber (1925:378–9, Tables 1 and 2) gives eleven major dances and ten minor dances associated with the *Kuksu*, although not all were used by any tribal group. He also lists ten spirit impersonations variously used by central California tribes, with some overlap with their dance inventory.

### Membership Fees

Information on membership fees is fairly limited and often of a very general nature. For instance, it was “costly” for elites to initiate their children into the ‘*Antap* Society of the Chumash (Noah 2005:32).

The Coast Miwok charged entry fees of beads for membership in their secret societies (Loeb 1932:113).

Valley Maidu paid US\$4 (1932 dollars) for training during their initiatory seclusion and US\$8 for their initiation plus a \$1 fee annually (Kroeber 1932:376–7). Valley Maidu *Hesi* initiates had to pay leaders “heavily” (Kroeber 1932:384). Individuals who took on the bear dancer role in Northern Maidu secret societies had to pay “heavily” (Dixon 1905:296). The Yuba River Maidu charged three woodpecker scalps for initiation into their secret society as well as fees for teaching dances and providing feather costumes (Dixon 1905:184–5,187). Some Maidu were said not to charge fees or pay for dances for young boys (ten to twelve years old); there is no mention of requirements for full initiation for people aged seventeen to twenty-five (Loeb 1933:164–5,167).

The Yuki initiates’ parents put rope, knives, net bags, snares, furs, and other property in a pile to pay the *Kuksu* member who was to teach their child (Kroeber 1925:184).

The Patwin had to pay for initiations into each successive rank or degree in the *Kuksu* Society, and fathers of initiates had to pay for their sons’ initiations (Kroeber 1925:371,387). Successors to leadership positions had to pay the retiring leader 2,400 beads for instruction (Kroeber 1932:318). Patwin *Hesi* members had to pay those who held dance positions and associated regalia to take their place and obtain their regalia; seating places at ceremonies also had to be paid for (US\$4 (in 1932) or 320 beads). In the Sacramento Valley, *Hesi*



Society members had to pay for initiations into each of the ten to twelve ranks above the entry-level membership (Bean and Vane 1978:667).

### **Public Displays of Power and Wealth**

Among the Chumash, public displays of supernatural powers at ritual feasts included fire walking and “eating” live coals so that they could be seen glowing through members’ cheeks (Boscana 1978:59,177). Shamans also engaged in public contests at feasts in which they paralyzed or blinded, and then cured, one another (Blackburn 1976:241).

*Kuksu* dances for the entire village, presumably as part of rituals, were held in the open and therefore were presumably open to the public; other dances were in the dance house (Loeb 1926:355; Barrett 1952:304). The Southeast Pomo held public dances in brush structures where women and children were allowed to attend (Loeb 1932:127–8). Enactments of death and resurrection by secret society members together with swallowing rattlesnakes and regurgitating them, or other displays of power, including bear impersonations, were also featured (Loeb 1926:351,375; Kroeber 1932:404). The Southern Pomo featured ghosts who came down from the hills with “fire blazing from their hair” (Loeb 1932:102). McLendon (1977:159–60) describes twenty to thirty men in “harlequin rig and barbaric paint” placing vessels of pitch on their heads to personify devils. They then came into the village with the pitch flaming on their heads and frightful noises, motions, and costumes to represent “demons.” Women and children were terrified and fled for their lives. The men swung blazing firebrands in the air, yelled, whooped, and made frantic dashes at the “devils” to drive them away. This created a dramatic spectacle that struck fear into the hearts of the assembled hundreds of women who screamed, or fainted, or clung to their male protectors. The “devils” succeeded in entering the dance house and the bravest of men entered to parley with them, finally expelling them from the dance house into the mountains with sham fighting. Following this, the society head handled a de-fanged rattlesnake and admonished women to be chaste, industrious, and obedient.

Kato *Kuksu* members (doctors) and “ghost” performers rolled in fires, played with coals of fire, and appeared out of the fires (or smoke) (Loeb 1932:30–1,35). The use of “tricks” and acrobatics were also referred to (34).

Public masked *Kuksu* performances took place among the Wappo at “brush structures” (Loeb 1932:110). For initiations, ghosts entered from the hills and should have been easily seen by everyone. They also stepped into fires, throwing coals around (110). The Coast Miwok held public *Kuksu* dances with feasts afterward (116,118). At initiation ceremonies, spirits arrived with fire in their hair.

The Yurok dances were the one occasion when the wealthy could publicly display the property on which their political and ritual roles depended (Kroeber 1925:54).

Members of the Maidu secret societies gave harvest and first salmon feasts which also featured activities meant to curry favor with spirits, prevent sickness, and protect against bears (presumably public performances, or at least events for all important community members) (Loeb 1933:146–7, 194). There was also an annual dance and shamanic competition that was open to the public in which competitors shot painful power at each other and the last shaman standing was determined to be the most powerful; the tobacco contests may have been similar (Dixon 1905:272; Loeb 1933:140, 161–3). Shamans could also walk through fire (Dixon 1905:279). These competitions were supposed to rid the village of diseases. Séances by the secret society head were also meant to be attended by everyone in the village (Loeb 1933:163); however, given the small size of the structure where séances were conducted, this probably referred to representatives from the major families.

Yuba River Maidu doctors also held competitions once a year to determine who was the most powerful. These were probably public spectacles to demonstrate members' supernatural powers since they involved fire walking, holding embers in mouths, handling snakes, and the revival of competitors who had fallen in supernatural power battles (Loeb 1933:180). Dances were organized twice a year by the secret society at which both men and women could be spectators (Loeb 1933:187). In addition, each new secret society initiate had to host a feast open to all persons (Dixon 1905:326).

Northern Maidu *Kuksu* members held public processions at mourning rituals for deceased fellow members in which considerable wealth and powerful images of the deceased were displayed (Dixon 1905:254, 257).

The Yokuts held a public inter-tribal contest of medicine men testing their abilities to supernaturally “poison” their opponents, the losers having to pay the victors – a practice similar to northern Yuki contests (Kroeber 1925:506–7). Gayton (1948:128) described a performance attended by spectators and visitors in which a resident shaman “shot” various people dead with supernatural bullets. Those who were “killed” were covered with strings of shell bead wealth and then subsequently restored to life.

Women and uninitiated individuals were permitted to look into the dance house during the first and last nights of the less sacred Patwin ceremonies (Kroeber 1925:387). There were also public processions to the dance house by *Hesi* members in costume (Kroeber 1925:388). The head spirit owner of the *Hesi* Society was considered “dangerous.” These spirits could cure the sick and came from the ocean for the well-being of people (Kroeber 1932:336–7). Similarly, *Kuksu* spirits danced in the towns before entering the dance house (Kroeber 1932:338).

Upon entering a Wintun village for one of the *Hesi* ceremonies, guests from other villages formed a line that danced through the village to the dance

house, where the leaders of the guest villages gave presents to the host ceremonial leader (Barrett 1919:456).

### Sacred Ecstatic Experiences

Except for anthropophagy, all the techniques discussed in Chapter 2 for inducing sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) were commonly used in Californian secret societies.

*Datura* and vision quests were used by 'Antap elites to obtain the power of supernatural helpers, to initiate youths into the 'Antap Society, and at certain ceremonies such as winter solstice rituals (Hudson and Underhay 1978:38,57,146). Bean and Vane (1978:667) state that this was characteristic of the *Toloache* Cults in general, and that the use of narcotics, especially tobacco, for these ends was a common feature throughout the Americas.

Among the Pomo, initiation into the *Kuksu* Society involved abstinence from food and drink, symbolic death and resurrection, followed by feasting "on delicious foods" (Loeb 1926:356–7; 1932:5–6). There were also ceremonies in which the backs of boys and girls were "scratched" (presumably drawing blood; Loeb 1926:382–3), all of which implies the induction of some kind of ecstatic or altered state of consciousness. The *Kuksu* impersonator in initiations of the Clear Lake Pomo similarly "scarified" initiates (Gifford 1926:353). East Pomo initiate boys were also "cut" by supernatural spirits in their brush houses, as well as being shot in their navel by a supernatural spirit so that they bled and passed out but woke up the next day completely recovered and "reborn" (McLendon 1977:26–7). The Southeastern Pomo *Kuksu* boy initiates became frenzied and possessed, but were cured by members of the secret society (Loeb 1932:130–1). For initiation into a second more esoteric society, Kroeber (1925:262) suggested that initiates were shot or stabbed (in appearance) with spears or arrows thrust directly into their naked bodies. Then the pretended wound was healed by members. For the ghost ceremonies, ghost performers conducted themselves in as terrifying a manner as possible, trying to instill fear in non-members. Their feats included eating live coals and plunging hands into fires, stuffing their cheeks, propping open their eyelids, and stretching their mouths to create grotesque appearances. Performances also could involve impressive acrobatic displays, including diving headlong down the smoke hole of the dance house (Kroeber 1925:263–4,266). All such feats presumably involved some kind of SEE.

Kato boy initiates had little food, perhaps over a five- to six-month period (Loeb 1932:28,30), which was undoubtedly meant to induce altered states of consciousness.

Patwin initiates had to remain in the dance house for two days and nights without moving, but were sometimes also involved in a sweating dance.

Dancers were “in a frenzy and bleeding at their mouths” and rushed outside, where they had to be calmed and followed so that they did not get lost or have any accidents (much like being possessed; Kroeber 1925:385). Performers of the Condor and Ghost (*Wai-saltu*) dances became “insane” upon being possessed by spirits from the north, demonstrating how powerful and dangerous involvement in those rituals was (Kroeber 1932:315–19). Performers spent three to four days singing, dancing, sweating, bleeding from the nose or mouth, and becoming “crazy” (318). Novices were also “shot” or stabbed and then revived in the *Kuksu* ceremonies (323). Hill Patwin *Kuksu* initiates were “killed” over a fire and physically thrown out of the dance house. They might be speared the following day by the *Kuksu* spirit, a common initiation feature in the *Kuksu* area (345–6). Patwin Ghost dances, in particular, seem to have been noted for sacred ecstatic trances and extraordinary behavior, according to Bean and Vane (1978:666).

Wailaki initiates selected for advanced training as “doctors” had to dance until they passed out, and put obsidian or flint in their mouths to make them bleed (Loeb 1932:76). At the entry level of the society, initiates (boys and girls) were taken to a mountain top for eight days of instruction with no food and little water (Loeb 1932:76), again, undoubtedly, to produce SEEs.

Maidu smoked tobacco, and perhaps other herbs also, until they passed out, as a means of contacting spirits (Loeb 1933:140). It should be noted that native tobacco was far stronger than contemporary cigarette tobacco and had a potency closer to contemporary cannabis. Northern Maidu initiates abstained from eating meat, spent eight days in the dance house, and obtained new names, probably indicative of some kind of death and rebirth (Dixon 1905:275,326). Chico Maidu initiates had to fast and were subjected to being tossed over a fire and shot with an arrow, resulting in their ritual death, after which they were thrown out of the smoke hole and then resurrected (Loeb 1933:192).

Yuki Ghost Society initiates had nothing to eat during the four days of their initiation (Kroeber 1925:189). Dramas involved being in the dance house under pitch dark conditions with invisible ghosts standing around initiates, singing and drumming. When the fire was stirred it revealed monstrous painted beings with false hair of maple bark and faces distorted by grass in the cheeks and a twig in each nostril, also levering up the lower lip, and making unnatural sounds (Kroeber 1925:186). Such conditions and dramas were most likely meant to instill SEEs.

Wintun *Hesi* dancers became exhausted by the end of their performances, and dancing was kept up continuously throughout the day and night, another means of creating altered states of consciousness (Barrett 1919:451).

Yurok dancers were shot dead ritually for some performances and then revived (Gayton 1948:128).

### Enforcement

Hudson and Underhay (1978:145) simply said that members of the '*Antap* Society were supported but "greatly feared" by common members of their communities. Boscana (1978:61) claimed that children were taught to believe in the power of the "sorcerers" and this resulted in complete acquiescence. This enculturation was apparently not completely successful, for Boscana (42-3,46) also stated that skeptical boys, even sons of chiefs, were killed for profaning the rituals, and that the chief, whose only authority was supposed to be the supernatural fear that he could instill, could have dissenters executed. People who violated the '*Antap* temple were supposed to be killed (39). Other people were pressured and even threatened to contribute to ritual gatherings (Gamble 2008:198,225,267-8). Chiefs (members of the '*Antap*) could impose sanctions and death sentences which could be carried out by an "executioner." In this domain, poisoner "shamans" (presumably members of the '*Antap*) were used to increase the power and wealth of elites. "Sorcerers" apparently did whatever they wanted with women they encountered in the bush and at feasts (Boscana 1978:48,166-7). The Yokuts similarly had supernatural enforcers, referred to as "poisoners" (Gayton 1930:398,408,413-14). These accounts indicate that enculturation and the power of belief were far from sufficient to obtain compliance from the general populace.

Similarly, Pomo secret society heads were portrayed as being so powerful that they could kill enemies by using a secret language, while were-bears actually punished offenders (Loeb 1926:331,333,335). Pomo bear shaman/warriors could kill at whim (Loeb 1932:85). Kato "doctors" could shoot sickness into enemies and were considered dangerous (39). Bear skins were also worn by some doctors to kill enemies – perhaps internal enemies as well as external enemies, or anyone questioning the claims, privileges, or "requests" of the secret societies (40).

Wailaki doctors could inflict sickness or death on people and so were feared (Loeb 1932:83).

As implicit threats, Northern Maidu secret society leaders organized annual public competitions between shamans to demonstrate who was most powerful. They tried to "poison" each other, subsequently curing their victims (Dixon 1905:272). That they could use this power against those who displeased them may be indicated by the use of cremation to bury them which was otherwise employed only for evil people (Dixon 1905:272; Loeb 1933:152,161-3). Valley Maidu society members maintained that uninitiated people who saw *Yohyo* and other spirits would die (Kroeber 1932:380).

The leader of the secret society was a powerful shaman and like other shamans could kill those he wished or those he was paid to kill (Kroeber 1932:272,279,328,331). In addition, anyone who touched the sacred cape of the head of the secret society would die (Kroeber 1932:328). Anyone who

showed disrespect to funerary images of society members (and probably any other disrespect) could be killed. Oral histories related that thirty people were killed for desecrating one of these images at a mourning ceremony (Dixon 1905:257,281). There were many other stories of disrespectful non-believers who were killed. Yuba River Maidu had a bear costume, the wearer of which could kill victims (Loeb 1933:182).

The Patwin heads of secret societies claimed that they could kill people with their powers (Kroeber 1932:319,336). In addition, there were grizzly bear hereditary and purchased roles that were integrated into the secret societies. Such “bears” were reputed to kill people in the bush (Kroeber 1932:286,321) and thus could probably intimidate any uncooperative individuals into acquiescence or periodically terrorize communities.

In the *Hesi* ceremonies of the Wintun, one of the roles of the clowns was to levy a fine on anyone acting contrary to custom, especially those who refused to do what the clowns asked or who showed displeasure at their antics (Barrett 1919:458).

### **Cannibalism and Human Sacrifice**

Boscana (1978:48,62) refers to Chumash sorcerers (the *pupulum* who were members of the ‘*Antap*’) as “eaters of human flesh” although this may have been a specialist role. Such people were greatly feared. Aside from this account, Loeb (1933:145) argues that human sacrifice and cannibalism were absent in California.

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

In general, foot drums, flutes, or whistles (Fig. 3.3), and feathered costumes, headbands, capes, or other apparel, were ubiquitous and a detailed documentation of geographical distributions would be of interest primarily to regional specialists. The foot drum “is a large, hollowed slab, 6, 8, or 10 feet long, placed with its convex side up, above a shallow excavation in the rear of the dance house, and stamped on by the dancers ... this drum is used only by secret society tribes” (Kroeber 1925:365). Scratching sticks and sucking tubes were also very widespread and viewed by Loeb (1929:286; 1933:229) as a substrate of most North and South American healings and initiations. The bullroarer was commonly, but not universally, used (mainly among the southern California groups as well as the Pomo and Coast Miwok in central California). The Cortina Patwin also used bullroarers (Loeb 1933:225) as did the Kato (see below). It was also widely used in South America, Australia, New Guinea, as well as in Classical Greek cults (Loeb 1929:253,281,285). In California, it was almost always associated with either secret society rituals or tribal initiations,

although there were a few groups that used it as a toy or for rain or magic (Loeb 1929:269–70,285).

In more specific areas, the Chumash '*Antap* members used whistles or flutes and bullroarers. These have been found archaeologically in the Middle Period, probably indicating a secret society tradition thousands of years old. Turtle shell rattles were used for some feasts (Boscana 1978:42,160; Gamble 2012:183). Feather robes (Fig. 3.2) used by society dancers were the most valuable of all prestige items (Boscana 1978:30,139fn). In the sacred enclosure (*siliyik*) there were sacred (presumably '*Antap*) bundles in coyote skins containing feathers, deer antlers, mountain lion claws, beaks and claws of hawks, and arrows or arrowheads (Hudson and Blackburn 1986:57; Boscana 1978:155). Crystals, stone bowls, and pipes were used for rainmaking and curing, while "sun sticks" with beads set in mastic were used at winter solstice rituals (Hudson and Underhay 1978:33,37,146; Boscana 1978:139fn). Boscana (1978:135) also reported small mortars used for preparing *Datura*. Feathered poles were general features of "shrines." At least some of the ritual paraphernalia, including whistles, sun sticks, and headdresses, was stored in dry caves or rock shelters or in the chief's residence (Boscana 1978:131; Gamble 2008:183). Gamble (2008:183–6,245) also reported large stone ollas (likely to be bowls) and mortars used for feasting by elites, presumably in the context of '*Antap* ceremonies.

*Kuksu* members among the Pomo all had bullroarers representing the voice of Thunder Man or the dead, as well as a bag for curing, containing bones, long flints, whistles, feathers, and herbs, among other items (Loeb 1926:302,321,324,355,367; 1932:10). During initiation, novices had to use scratching sticks and avoid eating meat (Loeb 1926:359). Members' spirit costumes used in curing, initiations, and presumably other rituals included shells, horns, hooves, beads, feathers, down, bone pins to hold feathers in costumes (some elaborately etched), and whistles (Loeb 1926:356–7,365–6,381; Barrett 1952:308,312–14). Beads were worn on belts, neck bands, wrist bands, or as simple strings. Foot drums representing the sound of thunder were used for dances (Loeb 1926:379). Wappo and Southern Pomo both used bone whistles (Loeb 1932:103,110), while the Lake Miwok used both bullroarers and wood whistles (Loeb 1932:118).

Kato members of the *Kuksu* used bullroarers made of deer scapulae; initiates had to use scratching sticks during training, and "doctors" used bone whistles, considered to be very dangerous (Loeb 1932:27,29,45). Bear skins with claws were presumably also used (40).

Coast Miwok used bullroarers and scratching sticks in initiations (Loeb 1932:116).

Huchnom initiates in the *Kuksu* Cult, featuring a "big head" (creator) impersonator, ate only with a mussel shell or elk horn spoon, and scratched only with a bone scratcher (Kroeber 1925:204–5).



Only members of the Maidu secret societies smoked (to contact spirits; Loeb 1933:140) and hence pipes were probably restricted to them.

Chico Maidu members used a foot drum, scratching sticks for initiates, and feathered costumes (Loeb 1933:192). Kroeber (1925:433) listed a variety of feathered headdresses, capes, masks, and animal skins used in Maidu *Kuksu* dances. Valley Maidu regalia included feathered cloaks, belts, helmets or hats, headdresses, fans, tulle skirts, whistles, and split-stick clappers (Kroeber 1932:388).

Scratching sticks and bone whistles were also used by Northern Maidu initiates (Dixon 1905:255,326), and mortars were considered sacred since they were only used for making acorn meal in the context of rituals and feasts (Dixon 1905:327). Feathered sticks indicated a secret society member's rank (Dixon 1905:255).

Miwok bear impersonators used curved pieces of obsidian in place of bears' claws, and similar obsidian pieces ("Stockton curves") were recovered from old burials (Kroeber 1925:450).

Whistles were part of the paraphernalia used by Rumsey Patwin *Kuksu* members to cure the sick and drive bears away (Loeb 1933:216). The Cortina Patwin used bullroarers (225). Scratching sticks were used by *Kuksu* initiates (Kroeber 1932:328,346).

Wintun *Hesi* ceremonies strongly emphasized sacred poles of various sizes (short to 25 feet long) decorated with feathers and cloth, both inside and outside dance houses (Fig. 3.2) and other special locations (e.g., eating areas) (Barrett 1919:241). The ceremonies also used feather capes, "big-head" headdresses, double bone whistles, cocoon rattles, split stick rattles, and log drums (Barrett 1919:242–5,248).

In general, *Hesi* Society costumes, including those for the *Kuksu* itself, were very elaborate (Bean and Vane 1978:667).

## Structures and Activity Locations

### *Southern California*

Ritual structures in the south were primarily "large roofless inclosures (sic) of brush, a sort of fence," used for dances, rituals, mourning ceremonies, and other rites. Kroeber (1925:626,628; also 523, 860) provided detailed accounts of a mourning ceremonial enclosure. This style of ritual enclosure occurred as far north as the Yokuts for mourning ceremonies, and Kroeber (1925:655) primarily associated such enclosures with anniversary mourning and *Toloache* (Jimson weed) ceremonies since the areas of occurrence largely coincided.

Juaneño ceremonial enclosures were open to the sky and consisted of brush fences with a smaller enclosure within. In or near the smaller enclosure was a coyote skin containing ritual items, serving as an altar with a sand painting in front of it (Kroeber 1925:639). Luiseño ritual structures were similar, although

the smaller enclosure was described as standing at some distance to one side, where performers prepared and dressed (Kroeber 1925:655)

Hudson and Blackburn (1986:50–2,56–9) gathered early accounts of Chumash sacred enclosures (*siliyik*) that were situated in the middle of villages close to the chief's house and built for the sun priest (Hudson and Underhay 1978:119; Boscana 1978:37–8,135–8). These open-air structures had wicker or matting walls about 2 meters high and were 2–4 meters in diameter, only large enough to hold two or three people and arranged so that others could not see inside. These structures enclosed an idol, altar, painted ceremonial pole, and a hearth (Hudson and Blackburn 1986:50, Fig. 306.1; see also Boscana 1978:34, 138). Feathers were abundantly used and eagles or condors that were killed were buried within these temples (Boscana 1978:58).

Surrounding this small private enclosure (accessible only to 'Antap members) there was a much larger fence or windbreak where important spectators of ceremonies had hearths and feasted. Hudson and Blackburn (1986:52) noted that the earliest accounts described permanent ritual areas and structures, whereas in later accounts sacred enclosures seemed more temporary. Some 'Antap ceremonies were held in the open on flats with windbreaks and a sacred brush enclosure (Gamble 2012:183). Other rituals were carried out in more remote locations, especially "in the mountains," on mountaintop shrines, and in rock shelters or caves during the winter solstice (Hudson and Underhay 1978:53,57–8,66,131,146–7).

Gamble (2008:215) reported the importance of 3–5 foot poles decorated with feathers as central features of shrines, sometimes in enclosures, although she did not specify whether these shrines were in villages or in more remote locations. Of special note was the use of caves for storing 'Antap ritual paraphernalia (see "Paraphernalia"), as well as the rock art made by 'Antap shamans or astrologers (after taking *Datura*) at caves or rock shelters used for these purposes and for vision quests. This included a specially made hole at Condor Cave that allowed the winter solstice sun to shine on specific rock art images. At least two other cave sites exhibited alignments with the sun at the winter solstice. The references in southern California to the use of caves for rituals and storing ritual paraphernalia are particularly important for the interpretation of prehistoric ritual uses of caves. Shrines were reportedly kept very clean, although craft-making and seed grinding for offerings were associated with them (Hudson and Underhay 1978:53,55,69–70).

### *Central and Northern California*

The large, circular, earth-covered dance house (often called a "sweat house") (Figs. 3.2, 3.4–3.7), usually featuring a foot drum, was the most typical feature of the *Kuksu* Cult (Kroeber 1925:365). It was sometimes used for sweat baths, as among the Sacramento Valley tribes, where they were affiliated with the

masked society cult, but in some groups specialized sweat houses existed which were smaller (15–30 feet in diameter vs. 40–60 feet for dance houses) and were located adjacent to the ceremonial houses (Kroeber 1925; Barrett 1916:4,9). Sweat houses often also functioned as men's clubs and sleeping places. Some authors speculated that sweat houses may have been related to kivas in the Southwest and also noted that they were lacking on the Northwest Coast (Kroeber 1925:794).

River Patwin *Kuksu* had dance houses in the main settlements which were noted as being 15 meters in diameter and 1.5 meters deep. One historic or protohistoric example at Los Baños Creek in Joaquin Valley was 28 meters in diameter with mud walls and contained thirty cremations (Pritchard 1970 in Gamble 2012:187). The chief generally sat in the center of the southern half of the structure with officials on his left, seated by rank (Gamble 2012:180,186; Kroeber 1925:387; 1932:333). Such ranked seating arrangements were similar to seating in Northwest Coast potlatches, Ainu bear sending ceremonies (Watanabe 1999:201), and the seating practices in Polynesian ritual structures (personal observation).

Hill Patwin dance/sweat houses had two entrances and one central pole (Kroeber 1932:293). The use of two entrances was a recurring feature of ceremonial/dance structures in this and some other areas. The Patwin young men reportedly slept inside the sweat house (Loeb 1933:207). The Rumsey Patwin secret society dancers were instructed “in the hills” or in the ceremonial house (217). The Cortina Patwin ceremonial house typically had one central post (223).

The Pomo had at least one men's sweat house structure in each village from which women were excluded. This was about 15–20 feet in diameter (Loeb 1926:159,163,354; Barrett 1952:Plate 31). However, these structures appear only to have been used in the winter by inland groups, while spring and summer rituals (probably for public displays) were held in open-air locations or in special brush structures at unspecified locations, which were built the day before the ceremonies (Loeb 1932:128). The southern Pomo had a dance house for ghost initiations, rebuilt every seven years “in a particular location” (102). Reportedly, there was a separate dance house for girls which may have been the same as the menstrual huts (8). Dance or assembly structures of the Clear Lake Pomo used for *Kuksu* initiations and important ceremonies were earth-covered, some being about 40–60 feet in diameter and featuring a large center post with eight perimeter posts (see Figs. 3.6 and 3.7; Kroeber 1925:242, Fig. 19). Powers (1877:158) described a semi-subterranean structure used by the Pomo for a dance lodge, and reported a large version (63 feet in diameter, 18 feet high, and 6 feet deep) constructed for initiations every seven years, each time in a different community with a *Kuksu* branch or chapter within a valley. These structures were said to hold a barely credible 700 people.

Children among coastal Pomo were initiated into the *Kuksu* Society in “bush dance houses” in the hills about 200–300 meters outside the villages where there were ceremonial structures, a dance area in a ceremonial clearing, camping areas, costuming areas, and areas for public observers (Loeb 1926:239,356–9,363). Instruction of “outfit doctors” (members of the *Kuksu* Society) also took place “in the hills,” likely at the same bush dance locations. McLendon (1977:27) described a similar scenario in which a “brush house” was built during the first day of an initiation by the Southeastern Pomo. This was where initiates were ritually cut and stayed for extended periods of time. The inland Pomo were not recorded as having indoor dance houses but did have twenty to thirty long poles erected at “bush houses” used for *Kuksu* pole ceremonies. These ceremonies were considered to be very widespread and very old (Loeb 1926:367,369).

Miwok semi-subterranean dance houses were up to 20 yards in diameter, with an east-facing door, and four center posts or two rows of posts versus the single large post or two posts set in a line with the door as among the Pomo, Wintun, Maidu, and Yuki (Kroeber 1925:447, Fig. 39). The sweat house was much smaller but built on the same plan.

Kato initiations into the *Kuksu* Society took place “in the hills,” presumably in the same, unspecified, locations where new “doctors” congregated and where doctors went “to the mountains” to bring their deity to the dance house for curing people (Loeb 1932:28,35,38). The dance house had a central pole and smoke hole; it was surrounded by ten to twenty conical residential houses, and was rebuilt every three years (43).

The sweat house of the Wailaki, with two forked central posts, appears to have been used for at least some ceremonies, and the highest ranking shaman used it as his residence (Loeb 1932:87). It is not clear whether the sweat house was the same structure as the “ceremonial house” which was located “farther down the hillside” from the between five and twenty houses that made up Wailaki villages. Initiates were taken to a mountain top for eight days with two to four instructors (Loeb 1932:76), but there is no description of such locations.

Nisenan dance houses were excavated down to a depth of 3 or 4 feet and earth-covered, being located “in major villages” (emphasis added). Sweat houses were small separate structures, accommodating only four or five men. At least one instance has been recorded of a cave being used for sweat baths as well as for unspecified ceremonies (Wilson and Towne 1978:388–9). Since the dominant ritual organization was the *Kuksu* Cult, these structures and the cave were probably used for *Kuksu* rituals. Ritual brush enclosures were used for mourning ceremonies at traditional locations “away from the village” (Wilson and Towne 1978:395), and Sinkyone world renewal ceremonies were held in “brush enclosures outside the village” (Nomland 1940:167).

The Wintun dance house was semi-subterranean and said to be 20–25 feet in diameter with a pole about 25 feet long erected in front, and two shorter poles on the roof top (see photographs and plans in Barrett 1919:441,445,449, Fig. 3). Ritual paraphernalia and gifts were kept along the wall behind the drum (456). A long table for feasting was located under trees near the dance house (460).

The Maidu built three ritual structures: a dance house with two main posts, a smaller earth lodge with one post for spirit mediums, and a men's house used by the secret society. The dance house was described as being large with two main posts and a dirt-covered roof in which all families slept during the winter. The men's house was referred to as being a small semi-subterranean structure that served as the headquarters for the secret society and a dressing room for performances in the dance house. This secret society headquarters was about 150 yards from the dance house (Loeb 1933:140,148,166,172). The head of the secret society also had his own, small "ceremonial house" where he conducted séances which purportedly "all the village attended." This seems unlikely given the small size described, unless people assembled outside the structure. This structure had a center pole (140,148,163–4). Poles were central ritual features in general (e.g., at mourning ceremonies, at shrines or open sites, and in or around ritual structures), and ritual objects or offerings to spirits, especially feathers, were often attached to the poles (154). The Yuba River Maidu main singing doctor (secret society head) held séances centered on a pole. These took place in the main ceremonial house where he also lived (181).

Northern Maidu secret societies built their community dance house, which featured the foot drum and sacred post representing an axis mundi for spirit entries and communications (Dixon 1905:169,287,310–11). The structure was 6–12 meters in diameter and dug about 1 meter into the ground. It had two sacred posts, the most important of which was about 3–6 meters tall, located behind the hearth, while a second post was 2–3 meters high. Older, presumably more important, men sat south of the fire (324). Spirits were especially associated with mountain peaks, cliffs, lakes, and waterfalls (265) so that one might expect remote secret society shrines, pilgrimages, or trips to acquire power to be located in these types of places.

The Yuki dance house, referred to as the "poison house," was owned by the chief, and construction of it may have been an important criterion for holding the position of head man or chief (Kroeber 1932:373). The dance house was used when the weather was unfavorable, whereas a brush shelter was used when the weather was very hot (Foster 1944:190). One example of a dance structure was 30 by 50 feet and was supported by a row of 9-foot posts down the center line with corresponding posts on the edge and the roof covered with poles and brush (Foster 1944:190).

The Pekwan Yurok jumping dance, which may not have been part of a secret society, was held in their sacred house which "accommodates only about

10 dancers” (Kroeber 1925:60). In contrast to other groups, Mono sweat houses were located “away” from living and activity areas (Jackson 2004:179).

A number of floor plans and photographs of the interiors of dance houses can be found in Barrett (1916:16, Fig. 3, Plates VI, VII, XI; 1952:Plate 31; Kroeber 1925:129, 387, Figs. 35, 39, Plates 11–13, 56, 60). In general, the descriptions and photographs show floors devoid of any furniture, features, or material items except for hearths, foot drums, and posts (e.g., Fig. 3.7).

### **Burials**

Ethnographers have provided little information concerning the burial of secret society officers or members. However, Maidu secret society members were always cremated whereas other people were buried (Loeb 1933:151–2). In addition, only secret society members had full mourning rituals involving approximately US\$200–300 (1934 or earlier dollars) worth of beads and images that were burned or carried about (152). However, elsewhere it was stated that cremation was used to bury Maidu shamans (presumably because of their dangerous power since cremation was otherwise employed only for evil people; 152, 161–3). Northern Maidu burning ceremonies for secret society members involved special clothed images using animal skins (e.g., lynx), processions of the secret society members, and burning of copious wealth, all of which were the high points of the communal mourning ceremonies (Dixon 1905:254–7). One historic or protohistoric Patwin dance house used for *Kuksu* rituals held thirty cremations (Pritchard 1970 in Gamble 2012:187). In southern California, there were “special mourning rites for religious initiates” (Kroeber 1925:860).

### **Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Networks**

In general, the inheritance of roles or membership ensured that key families were always represented so that memberships always cross-cut kinship groups.

All “outfit doctors” (*Kuksu* initiates) among the Pomo inherited their outfit from their family (Loeb 1932:10). Membership in the Southeast Pomo *Kuksu* Society was also loosely hereditary (Loeb 1932:127). Members of the *Kuksu* Society among the Pomo only came from certain families (Loeb 1926:242), presumably representing different kinship groups.

The members of the Maidu secret society held hereditary positions and inherited the guardian spirits which were supposed to give them supernatural powers (Loeb 1933:159, 161). Northern Maidu “shamans” were largely hereditary, but determined individuals could also acquire spirits in the mountains (Dixon 1905:274, 277).

The impersonation of spirits was usually an inherited role or ability passed from father to son, or at least to a near kinsman for the Patwin (Kroeber 1925:373).

Songs used in the *Hesi* ceremonies of the Wintun were privately owned and more or less inherited from father to son (Barrett 1919:459).

In the World Renewal Cults, dance houses were inherited and priests were from families that owned secret formulas (Bean and Vane 1978:664).

### Regional Organization

Bean and Vane (1978:662) made some of the most explicit observations about the regional character of the secret societies in California. They stated that the *Kuksu*, World Renewal, and *Toloache* Cults “integrated large numbers of people into social, economic, political, and ritual networks of considerable dimensions, including many thousands of people and sometimes hundreds of communities.” In addition they noted that the ritual rules of these societies generally required participation of religious leaders from other groups resulting in intergroup integration and regional ritual centers which also became regional economic, social, and political centers, apparently creating settlement hierarchies that were not politically organized as chiefdoms. “These major religious systems may also have been devices for political expansion” (Bean and Vane 1978:663).

The World Renewal Cults had a network of male priests who performed rites. Ritual hosts also invited neighboring people to ritual centers as specifically required in *Kuksu* Cult ceremonies, thereby sometimes integrating thousands of people from several language groups (Bean and Vane 1978:663–4). Such invitations involved reciprocal gift giving between hosts and guests, thus creating a potential basis for debt and power political structures (Bean and Vane 1978:665).

Kroeber (1925:374–5) asserted that there was no overarching *hierarchical* regional organization of the *Kuksu*, only a mutual respect by each community’s *Kuksu* Society for others as equals. However, it is also clear that members from different communities often joined together for ceremonies, and undoubtedly discussed regional political or socioeconomic matters. Kroeber (1925:388) described some participants in *Hesi* ceremonies at a “home village” as “residents of other towns ... each in a body ...” making “a formal approach in file to the dance house, headed by their own ‘big-head’ [*Kuksu*] dancers in costume.”

Kroeber (1932:259) further observed that Patwin dance houses only occurred in villages with head chiefs; settlements without dance houses were subordinate to those that had dance houses, thus indicating at least a regional hierarchical ritual organization. Dances and ceremonies spread from one village to another via purchase of rituals, including instruction (Kroeber 1932:340). The Hill Patwin held ceremonies with three to four other “tribelets” involving about a hundred spectators, with fifteen to twenty dancers inside the dance houses (Kroeber 1932:345).



Inland Pomo *Kuksu* members from different villages cooperated and participated in each others' rituals (Loeb 1926:368). Kroeber (1925:260) also referred to "visiting chiefs" at secret society dances. The bear ceremony of the Southeast Pomo was described as taking place once a year "in one village or another" where *Kuksu* members gathered, implying a regional organization (Loeb 1932:128). Powers (1877:158) described a group of "branch societies" within one or more valleys that each took a turn in hosting initiations of affiliate branch members in a seven-year cycle. Each community, in its turn, constructed an especially large dance house with a reported capacity of 700 people.

Yurok dances were held in the largest villages, involving representatives from different villages (Kroeber 1925:54–5). The dances were competitive displays of wealth and labor, with one to five neighboring village dancers and leaders attending (Kroeber 1925:55). The Deerskin dance – which may or may not have been a secret society performance – involved a number of major villages which sent dance groups with regalia to the events, representing the wealth of their community (Keeling 1992:81 – an observation perhaps derived from Goldschmidt and Driver 1943 or from Kroeber and Gifford 1949:68).

The "lucky" members of the Maidu secret society gave first fruits (harvest) feasts and first salmon feasts in which they invited members of secret societies from other villages to attend. Entire ridges constituted feasting and ceremonial units (Loeb 1933:146–8). Loeb (170) also stated that sacred dances were attended by representatives from four other villages. The Yuba River Maidu formed ceremonial groups of three to five villages (178). The Chico Maidu invited people (unspecified) from other villages to their winter dances (194). The Northern Maidu annual shamans' competition was a regional event (Dixon 1905:272), and groups of villages had their own secret societies (324). Secret society leaders also headed visits to other villages (332), indicating some political role or special relationship with other villages.

Some regional networks involved more than one ethnic group. For example, Huchnom villages hosted neighboring Pomo and Kato families for initiations into their Ghost Society, and this was subsequently reciprocated by cult organizers in the Pomo and Kato villages (Kroeber 1925:204).

Members of neighboring villages were invited to attend *Hesi* ceremonies among the Wintun, including adjacent parts of the Sacramento Valley, the Pomo and Wintun of Cache Creek, Sulphur Bank, and Upper Stony Creek (Barrett 1919:439,441).

Yuki feasts and dances were regional in scale with invitations extending to a twenty-mile radius (Kroeber 1932:373).

Hudson and Underhay (1978:31–2) referred to the '*Antap* as being central to "towns," "provinces," and large "ritual territories" governed by key

individuals. Gamble (2008:196,264) more explicitly stated that the '*Antap* Society connected elites throughout the Chumash region, and that the society was organized at the "provincial" level with representatives from major villages meeting at five-year intervals. Thus, it appears that the society had a strong regional structure.

On a much broader scale, Kroeber (1925:371) noted that the *Kuksu* Cult was adopted by a number of distinct linguistic/cultural groups including the Yuki, Pomo, Wintun, Maidu, Miwok, Costanoan, Esselen, Salinan, and some Athabascan and Yokuts. While no single organization or leadership may have existed across all these groups, several different groups do seem to have participated in the same regional organization, and the spread and continuing interactions plausibly provided the dynamics behind the material manifestations of archaeological "interaction spheres."

### Marking of Initiates

In terms of regional networks, it is possible that the permanent physical marking that Loeb (1929:249) referred to in most groups was carried out in order to identify real secret society members as opposed to false claimants. Only Pomo *Kuksu* initiates had ears and noses pierced (Loeb 1932:6). Southeastern Pomo and Wappo initiates were also cut on their backs with a sharp shell (Loeb 1932:110,128; McLendon 1977:27; Gifford 1926:353; see "Sacred Ecstatic Experiences").

Maidu initiates had their ears and noses pierced and plugged to show that they were full members, as did the Yuba River Maidu (Loeb 1933:168,186). Patwin *Kuksu* initiates also had their nasal septums pierced (Kroeber 1932:326).

Yuki Ghost Society initiates had burning sparks blown on to their arms (Kroeber 1925:187).

Initiates into the Cortina Patwin secret society had cuts made on their backs, while Rumsey Patwin initiates were shot or stabbed in the navel (Kroeber 1932:326; Loeb 1933:216,225); however, it is unclear whether the stabbing was real or not. There are at least some accounts of real blood being drawn, flint tips penetrating skin up to a half an inch and taking one to three months to heal as well as leaving scars. On the other hand, elsewhere the stabbing is referred to as a "sham" (Kroeber 1932:326,328) which could have been an acculturation development as the power of the societies diminished under the effects of industrial cash economics and government repressions.

### Power Animals

Animals that featured in dances were chosen for their "magical symbolism" rather than for their economic value. They often had "no appreciable food value, such as the coyote, grizzly bear, condor, nuthatch, and turtle" (Kroeber 1925:384). In contrast, there were no special dances for economically important species such as salmon or rabbits. The most sacred dances and costumes of the

*Hesi* and *Kuksu* Societies were of coyote, condor, and hawk (Bean and Vane 1978:667).

The bear dancer in the secret society seems to have had a central role among the Northern Maidu and many other groups. Successive members had to pay high prices to acquire these dances and costumes (Dixon 1905:296). The Maidu obtained power from animal guardian spirits or “fabulous monsters,” and the bear was considered as a member of the *Kuksu* Society (Loeb 1933:142,161,163; Dixon 1905:281).

The archaeological occurrence of widespread artistic styles emphasizing these animals may be a telltale marker of secret society ideology involving power animals and regionally dynamic networks of secret societies. In addition, as on the Northwest Coast, the occurrence of mythical “monsters” is an intriguing parallel to a number of archaeological depictions of composite animals such as the “unicorn” in Lascaux or the Sorcerer in Les Trois Frères cave. In addition, an emphasis on non-economical animal species has often been remarked upon in studies of Upper Paleolithic art. Similar suites of power animals occur in early Neolithic structures such as Göbekli Tepe (see Chapter 10).

### **Number of Societies in Communities**

In general terms, according to Bean and Vane (1978:665), most villages had one or more secret societies in the *Kuksu* area (e.g., Ghost Societies, *Kuksu*, *Hesi*, or *Aki* Societies), with the Ghost Society commonly occurring together with the *Kuksu*, but usually considered of lower rank.

The River Patwin had three secret societies (*Kuksu*, *Hesi*, and *Wai-saltu*) (Kroeber 1932:312; Gamble 2012:185,192).

The Yuki had only one society (Kroeber 1925:191). The Chumash appear to only have had one secret society: the *‘Antap*.

### **Number of Members and Proportion of Population**

There was considerable variability in access to membership in secret societies in California. As Bean and Vane (1978:665) summarized the situation, in some groups, males could not function without membership in at least one secret society; in other groups, members consisted only of the most powerful and wealthy. The Ghost Society served as a tribal initiation for some groups, while in others, especially in the north, Ghost Society membership was exclusively for the training of elites, sometimes including girls (Bean and Vane 1978:666). Some societies such as the *Hesi* in the Sacramento Valley were for all boys in the communities at the entry level, but there were ten to twelve further ranks within the societies which all required payments and were much more exclusive. In this respect, such societies resembled the Nootkan Wolf Society on the Northwest Coast where all boys were initiated at the entry level, but only a selected few progressed to the upper

ranks. In general, Bean and Vane (1978:665) noted that women, children, “and many male commoners were excluded from membership” in *Kuksu* Societies.

All Pomo chiefs were initiated into the *Kuksu* Society (Loeb 1926:355; Gifford 1926:354,360). In addition, chiefs and other secret society members were only from certain families (Loeb 1926:242). Of eighty-nine capable adults in one Clear Lake Pomo community, thirty-two were secret society members, including 45 percent of the men and 28 percent of the women, with those marrying into the community tending to be under-represented (Gifford 1926:352–3). Loeb (1926:365) gave quite different figures for inland Pomo secret societies whose members comprised about 10 percent of a community.

Hill Patwin *Kuksu* ceremonies involved about a hundred spectators with fifteen to twenty dancers (Kroeber 1932:345), perhaps an indication of the relative proportions of members to non-members.

Hudson and Underhay (1978:145) describe twelve officials in the ‘*Antap* Society of the Chumash, presumably in each community. It is not clear whether there were other lower ranking members of the society or not.

## Sex

Chumash women could be members of the ‘*Antap* Society (Hudson and Underhay 1978:32), but were not allowed in the sacred temples (Hudson and Blackburn 1986:58), while Boscana (1978:34,138) only mentioned them in singing roles in contrast to the adult male dancers.

Both women and men constituted members of the *Kuksu* Society among the Pomo (women forming 25–50 percent of the initiates). However, women were not involved in curing, dancing, or initiations, and were generally prohibited from seeing bullroarers. They held no named roles unless they were needed (Loeb 1926:235,355,365; 1932:125). Apparently women did not participate in the *Kuksu* dances (Gifford 1926:349). Female members led the bear dancers from the bushes among the Southern Pomo (Loeb 1932:104). Powers (1877 as cited in Barrett 1917:404) stated that the simple purpose of the secret societies “is to conjure up infernal terrors and render each other assistance in keeping their women in subjection.” This seems inconsistent with the inclusion of women as members, even if their roles were not as important as men’s.

Girls were trained separately from boys to become doctors or assistants among the Kato (Loeb 1932:32).

In contrast to the *Kuksu* practices, women were excluded from the Wappo secret societies (Loeb 1932:109). Similarly, only males were admitted to the Maidu secret societies (Loeb 1933:159,168), and neither Yuki nor Huchnom women were ever initiated in the Ghost Society and they could never enter the dance house during the ceremonies or know anything about them (Kroeber 1925:186,204).

One of the three initiations into the secret society of the Colusa Patwin was open to women, or at least those from high lineages. Women were only excluded from one ceremony, but could watch even that one from outside the dance house (Loeb 1933:208,211). Some girls were initiated into the Cortina Patwin secret societies, but they were still barred from some of the ceremonies (Loeb 1933:221). On the other hand, women could be members of the *Kuksu* Society (Kroeber 1932:323–4), and Kroeber (1925:435) described one *Kuksu* dance that was for women only.

In contrast to groups in and around the Sacramento Valley, Miwok women were allowed to witness all dances, including the most sacred, and probably participated in most of them (Kroeber 1925:451).

### Age of Initiates

Luiseño boys began acquiring animal spirit guardians and dancing at six or seven years old, presumably as part of their training for membership in the *Antap* Society (Boscana 1978:34,45,138). Gamble (2008:196) also noted that elites were initiated into the secret society as children.

Pomo boys began their initiation into secret societies at eight to ten years old, sponsored by a member whom the boy would eventually replace. However, boys were reported as only entering the men's sweat house at about fourteen to fifteen years old (Loeb 1926:161,270). After full initiation, boys were given feasts and beaded belts and necklaces. Powers (1877:158) reported that boys were initiated around ten to twelve years old.

At ten to twelve years old, Maidu boys could become helpers and be initiated into the entry grade of the secret society; however, full initiation only occurred when members were eighteen to twenty-five or even thirty years old (Kroeber 1932:376; Loeb 1933:165,167). Yuba River Maidu boys were initiated at around ten years old (Loeb 1933:185). Chico Maidu boys were initiated at between eight and ten years old (192). Northern Maidu boys were initiated at twelve to fourteen years old (Dixon 1905:323).

The first initiation for Calusa Patwin youths took place at around twelve to sixteen years of age (Loeb 1933:208). The Rumsey Patwin boys were initiated between twelve and twenty years old, while the Cortina Patwin boys joined the *Hesi* Society, which had *Kuksu* features, at about twelve years old (Loeb 1933:216,225). Hill Patwin boys were initiated when they were about ten years old (Kroeber 1932:345).

Yuki "children or youths" were initiated into the *Kuksu* Society when they were "quite small" (Kroeber 1925:184,188). Kato boys were initiated at the tribal level at around twelve years old. Entry into "doctors schooling" occurred at around seventeen to eighteen years old for boys and twelve to thirteen years old for girls (Loeb 1932:26,28,32). Wappo boys were initiated at around ten years old (Loeb 1932:110). Tolowa boys stayed with men in their sweat house

from the age of seven or eight (Gould 1966:70). Huchnom boys were initiated into *Kuksu* at around twelve years old (females were not initiated), and spent a year in training (six to twelve months were spent in the dance house) (Kroeber 1925:204).

### Feasting

The Kato provided new clothes and a big feast with women and children in the dance house for new initiates in the *Kuksu* Society (a.k.a., the doctors school) (Loeb 1932:31). The Pomo also prepared baskets of “delicious foods” for *Kuksu* initiations (6). Similarly, the Coast Miwok provided a feast after *Kuksu* dances (118).

Yuba River Maidu had feasts after boys were initiated, at least for their immediate families and dancers (Loeb 1933:186).

Each Northern Maidu initiate into a secret society had to give a feast that was supposed to be open to all persons (Dixon 1905:326), in addition to which there were feasts after the annual shamans’ competition and dances, as well as for becoming a shaman. There was also a feast for the entire village to celebrate new leaders of the secret society, together with apparently smaller feasts within the society’s dance house to choose new leaders (272, 275, 330). Acorn meal was considered sacred, and feasting foods included acorn bread, acorn soup, meat, and fish (316–17, 325, 327). In fact, feasts were called “soups” (325–7) and acorn soup was probably the most common food used in initiations and ceremonies throughout the *Kuksu* region.

Organizers of *Hesi* ceremonies among the Wintun provided visitors in the dance house (and presumably everyone else present) with a large basket of acorn soup and a large seed cake. After the dancing, more baskets of acorn soup and “an abundance of other food” was brought in, “and all feasted in the dance house” (Barrett 1919:456–7).

### Frequency of Events

Powers (1877:158) reported a cycle of seven years for individual Pomo communities to host *Kuksu* initiations, although this rotated between participating communities every year. Clear Lake Pomo *Kuksu* initiations were only held “at terms of some years” (Kroeber 1925:242). The Southern Pomo held *Kuksu* first fruits/harvest ceremonies four times a year (Loeb 1932:103). The Southeastern Pomo held a bear ceremony once a year (Loeb 1932:129). Kroeber (1932:404) stated that there was only one big *Kuksu* or Ghost ceremony, which was held in alternating years.

Wappo held *Kuksu* curing ceremonies once a year (Loeb 1932:109).

The Maidu only initiated people into their secret society every ten to twelve years, but held annual shamanic competitions and dances, harvest feasts, as well as frequent séances (Loeb 1933:146, 163, 167). Among the Yuba River Maidu,

secret society dances were held twice a year and were open to both men and women (Loeb 1933:187).

Yuki initiations into the Ghost Society occurred at intervals of “some” years (Kroeber 1925:187).

*Wai-saltu* (Ghost) ceremonies were held only irregularly, not every year (Kroeber 1932:321), possibly depending on yearly harvest successes.

The Wintun held a series of *Hesi*-related dances from October to May, amounting to twelve dances and eight ceremonies, with the beginning date determined by the spiritual visit of a shaman to the abode of the dead (Barrett 1919:439).



## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST AND MESOAMERICA

### INTRODUCTION

In dealing with the Southwest, it is important to distinguish between the Eastern Pueblos along the upper reaches of the Rio Grande River, and the Western Pueblos located farther south in the San José River drainage (Fig. 4.1). In Ware's (2014:43,50,52) synthesis of Pueblo social history, the Eastern Pueblos were dominated and governed by sodalities rather than kinship groups. He used the term "sodality" synonymously with "secret society." The Eastern Pueblos were relatively centralized with secret societies forming strong hierarchies approaching social stratification in terms of their control over social-ceremonial-political domains (52). Secret society sodalities controlled (and in some cases, still control) resources, rituals, and politics (53). Ware noted that the Eastern Pueblos had the "most complex, centralized, top-down political structure in Western North America north of Mexico" (121, citing Jorgenson 1980:222) and that this was based on economic, political, and ritual control. In the Eastern Pueblos, there were hierarchically planned residential constructions that contrasted with the family planned constructions in the Western Pueblos. Ware compared the ethnographically documented Eastern Puebloan levels of control to the organizations responsible for the prehistoric Chaco system, but perhaps of lesser magnitude (Ware 2014:173).

In contrast, the role of corporate kinship groups was much more important in the Western Pueblos. Various kinship groups owned resources, kivas, and



4.1 Map showing the principal ethnic groups of Central and Southwestern North America mentioned in Chapters 4–6.

much of the ritual paraphernalia. As a result, political and ritual organization was more heterarchically based, with no clear hierarchies. This was reflected in the multiple and relatively small kivas in the western area.

Whether Pueblo societies should be considered communities organized as transegalitarian groups or as something more complex, such as chiefdoms, has been a controversial issue. In his comprehensive analysis of historic and pre-historic Pueblo social structure, Ware (2014:14) took the view that historic Pueblos were transegalitarian communities, although the Eastern Pueblos were ritual polities uniquely organized at the inter-community level on the basis of pan-tribal secret sodalities (Ware 2014:47,191). Ware maintained that most eighth- and ninth-century villages had no strong central political institutions or leaders. He accepted that there was significant social differentiation between segments of communities (although see Ware 2014:109,121), but he saw no dominant individuals publicly exercising power (111). These are all common

characteristics of many transegalitarian societies such as those already discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Egalitarian versus non-egalitarian models of Southwestern society are still hotly contested issues as exemplified by the interpretations of social organization at Grasshopper pueblo (the egalitarian model) versus Chavez Pass (the hierarchical model; Ware 2014:57–8). Ware (2014:52, 121) referred to the egalitarian model as a “major misconception.” Both he and Whiteley (1986:70) convincingly argued that the Southwest was far from egalitarian. Clans were ranked and lineages were ranked within clans. Only 30 percent of the clans owned land or ceremonial property, and not all individuals within clans even had land or property (Whiteley 1986:70). Some ethnographers wondered to what extent the superficial egalitarianism in the Pueblos might be due to the attempts of leaders to be inconspicuous to Europeans in order to hide from the government (e.g., Parsons 1939:151).

Like Whiteley and Ware, Brandt (1977:25; 1980:126–8) stressed the oppressive and unresponsive nature of Taos political leaders toward those without full access to the religious and political system. She noted that religious-political leaders (the *Lulina*, or “Old People”) maintained a firm grip on their society thanks to their power to fine, imprison, whip, or expel anyone who threatened their authority (Brandt 1980:141). They also employed supernatural sanctions. The result was a non-egalitarian, hierarchical social organization based on secret societies, although she concluded that the egalitarian:hierarchical dichotomy is too simplistic given the lack of material differences between households (Brandt 1994:13–14, 18–20). She also noted that equality is very difficult and costly to maintain, citing other authors such as Paynter (1989) and Flannagan (1989), to which can be added Wiessner (1996) and Cashdan (1980).

According to Levy (1992:38, 42), the best land in the American Southwest was owned by the highest ranked lineage of the highest ranked clan. In some Western Pueblos, this clan controlled twice as much land as was needed for their subsistence needs. There was no obligatory sharing of maize harvests. Levy (1992:55) maintained that access to land was obtained by acquiring ritual roles; however, owing to the high costs of obtaining ritual paraphernalia and hosting the required feasts, it can be argued that the main factor in acquiring ritual roles was owning productive land. On Second and Third Mesa, the Bear Clan owns all the most productive floodwater corn fields. The Bear Clan allots prime acreage to other clans based on their contributions to the ceremonial round (J. Ware, personal communication). In the Eastern Pueblos, ritualists ultimately controlled land use (J. Ware, personal communication).

Ware’s (2014:46) analysis indicated that the Western Pueblos were dominated and governed largely by corporate kinship groups which also controlled the ritual organizations. There were fifteen to thirty clans per village in the Hopi area. Clans owned land, houses, and the ceremonies used in sodality secret

societies. The control over ceremonies was primarily via ownership of fetishes and paraphernalia by the clans. The clans provided head priests for the secret societies whose rank and file membership could come from any descent group in the community.

### *Origins*

While many archaeologists view clans and sodalities as late innovations (Ware 2014:75,186), it appears that secret societies of some form had an early origin in the area (178–80,186). Ware viewed the necessary conditions for establishing secret society sodalities as existing by the eighth century CE and items in burials similar to those reported ethnographically as being used by secret societies occurred at least by the tenth century of the Common Era (103). More recent secret societies probably represent variations on old themes.

In particular, the *Katsina* Cult is generally viewed as a relatively recent development, probably c. 1300 CE, and other sodality origins are often considered to date to this period (Ware 2014:166,178–80). The *Katsina* spirits were strongly associated with the dead and ancestors who served as intermediaries between men and the gods in a fashion similar to Christian saints (165,181). *Katsina* spirits occupied important roles in rain-making, curing, and warfare. Since all community members, or at least all boys, were supposed to join the *Katsina* Society in the Western Pueblos, archaeologists have generally viewed it as unifying the village and countering fission tendencies between kinship groups (166). This was supposed to have been reinforced by the collection and redistribution of quantities of food (178–80). It is interesting that Parsons (1939:167) described the *Katsina* as a “poor man’s cult,” which may indicate that it was originally created in reaction to the domination of more elite secret societies similar to examples in Chapters 5 and 9.

Since some ethnographers in other areas such as the Plains, the American Northwest Coast, and Africa thought that secret societies emerged from warrior organizations, it is worth mentioning that in the Southwestern War Societies, priests played dominant community roles and that a major function of many societies was to promote success in war (Ware 2014:127,169–70,174). For instance, White (1930:613) noted that some societies, such as the Flint Society, were closely associated with warriors. This was the case with the Rio Grande Keres where the Flint Society was the highest ranked, and its head priest was considered the “inside chief,” while the head priest of the Warrior Society was considered the “outside chief” of the community. With the suppression of warfare, the functions of the Warrior Societies have been largely assumed by Medicine Societies (J. Ware, personal communication).

### *Explanatory Models*

In general, Southwestern archaeologists view Pueblo ritual architecture as a response to a need to integrate communities or social units, especially from 1250 to 1450 CE when climate deteriorated and communities may have been forced to coalesce around the most dependable water sources. It is conceivable that such forced coalescence could have led to competition for good agricultural land and to the formation of corporate kinship groups in order to control access to prime land (Ware 2014:75). According to these views, “ceremonial life was sufficient to prevent the alienation of the common people” and provided a means for peripheral families to access the core institutions of the communities (Levy 1992:57,69,78).

However, Ware (2014:86,93) critiqued the integrative role of Pueblo ritual organizations as another major misconception of archaeologists. He argued instead that ritual organizations built social hierarchies and political power. He also maintained that secret society ritual organizations emerged much earlier than generally assumed, well before the climate deteriorated or communities were forced to coalesce.

In the following section, I have dispensed with a separate overview of the ethnographic observations owing to the limited details of the coverage.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

Ware (2014:x–xi) acknowledged the prominence of an egalitarian ethic in the Pueblos, but emphasized that clan leaders used sodalities to obtain greater authority in the Western Pueblos, and that in the Eastern Pueblos, sodality heads undermined the political power of corporate kinship groups with which they competed and which they ultimately displaced (128,191). That being said, Ware thought that there was a role for secret societies both in creating inclusive community integration and also in the validation of resource control and rank which was a more exclusive function (112). However, it seems to me that the inclusive rituals sponsored by the dominant organizations appear to have been held in order to garner the acceptance, or at least acquiescence, of the dominating political and economic roles of secret society leaders. In other culture areas, similar inclusive secret society events such as public feasts which everyone could theoretically attend and public ceremonies were sponsored (see Chapters 2, 3, 7, and 9). In these other areas, the motives for forming secret societies were blatantly to promote members’ self-interests. Sponsoring inclusive events for supposedly altruistic motives such as promoting community

unity would be inconsistent with such motives or the sometimes explicitly documented self-serving actions of secret society members.

I suggest that it would be more reasonable to view the hosting of inclusive ritual events as another strategy to consolidate power and augment the control of secret societies either (1) by blunting critiques of non-members; (2) by establishing greater acquiescence via the implicit debts created by accepting food or supernatural benefits; or (3) through opportunities to display supernatural and profane power in order to cow non-members or recruit new members attracted to power. Indeed, all of these reasons may have been behind the sponsorship of inclusive secret society events. Rather than being designed primarily to create community integration, I think Pueblo secret society inclusive ritual events can be better interpreted as motivated primarily by self-serving interest (like inclusive secret society events elsewhere), although obviously they did enhance community integration as well.

Brandt (1977:23,25,27; 1980:126–8,141) made it very clear that leaders of secret societies held the most political power in Pueblo communities, frequently forcing their will on the disenfranchised majority who often protested the system but to no avail (Brandt 1977:25; see “Relation to Politics”). Undoubtedly because of the access to power provided by secret societies, contending factions were rife within ritual societies, as noted by Parsons (1939:149,152–4) and Levy (1992:69). This is a common characteristic of secret societies elsewhere. I suggest that such intense and chronic disputes are symptomatic of competition for control over valued resources and power. In Taos, the use of secrecy in ritual societies was intimately tied up with political factionalism (Brandt 1980:144). Where one faction could not easily dominate community affairs, it appears that Pueblo secret societies formed power-sharing alliances that effectively dominated community life. They partitioned ritual roles in a symbiotic fashion with checks and balances. Such power-sharing alliances occur elsewhere in transegalitarian and chiefly communities (e.g., the lineage alliances among the Akha, in Clarke 2001; Hayden 2016). Similar ritual and feasting alliances may even form the core of simple chiefdoms, as on Futuna in Polynesia as suggested by Hayden and Villeneuve (2010).

### **Sources of Wealth**

Ritual leaders controlled the most important resources (Ware 2014:53). Brandt (1994:16,18,20; 1999) points out that the elite leaders in Taos either directly owned or controlled the rights to most land and mineral sources; they controlled trade and production; they owned the kivas, houses, and structures for ritual materials as well as access to shrines. More particularly, high-ranking leaders were given “a large share of the trophies of ceremonial hunts” as well as booty from raids or warfare (Stevenson 1894:118,121; Parsons 1939:156,164,788,824). Society members also did agricultural work for high-ranking society officials

(Parsons 1939:159). Generous compensations in the form of food (feasts or baskets of flour) and wood were given to societies that provided curing or beneficial rituals (Stevenson 1894:75; Parsons 1939:164,709–10), and rooms were filled with food for those who battled sorcerers (Parsons 1939:720). Corn was given to certain important societies and there were parades of clans “loaded down with the pay they feel called upon to make” to societies for clowning and procuring rain (Parsons 1939:164–5). Payments to *koyemshi* (masked society clowns) were especially valuable, consisting of blankets, sheep, trunks, and baskets of bread (Parsons 1939:756fn). *Katsina* dancers were given food when they danced in the major households, and initiations generally “entailed heavy expenditures for feasting and gift-giving” (Parsons 1939:741,752,785,599). These payments largely supported ritual specialists who were exempt from agricultural work, but who were not supposed to acquire – or at least blatantly display – wealth except in the form of ritual paraphernalia and feasts.

It is often stated or implied in many discussions that material and political benefits devolved from the ritual knowledge and roles within the secret societies; however, it can also be argued that substantial material resources were required for attaining high-ranking positions in the secret societies and acquiring such benefits. Ritual knowledge as the basis of power was plausibly merely an ideological subterfuge to disguise the real basis of power (see “Ideology”). The issue of whether control over resources or control over ritual was the basis of power is a thorny one that cannot be easily resolved. If resource-owning kinship groups, rather than individual households, were the ultimate power brokers, they could put puppet representatives in positions of power who did not necessarily possess great wealth themselves, thereby masking real relationships of power and resource control. Such kinship group resource and power relationships have been documented in other transegalitarian societies, including similar ritual roles representing lineage interests but not necessarily filled by the wealthiest or most powerful lineage members (Clarke 2001; Hayden 2016). This may be a common occurrence in many transegalitarian societies.

### Relation to Politics

Ware (2014:44,175) noted that priests in all communities selected secular political leaders. Keresan medicine societies controlled village politics and chose political leaders and higher officials (White 1930:604,616,618; Whiteley 1986:70). Brandt (1977:17,19,27; 1980:126–8,141; 1994:15) similarly noted that participation in the religious societies had political functions and was the most important factor in Taos social organization. Obtaining rank in the societies was a prerequisite for full participation in the political system. The *Lulina* (“Old People”) class had a firm grip on the society through its control of the political-judicial system and use of supernatural sanctions. Leaders of secret societies automatically



became members of the Pueblo Council and the town chief thus had strong connections with the secret societies, although the societies do not appear to have preoccupied themselves with daily or mundane decision-making (Brandt 1977:24; Parsons 1936:79; 1939:120–4, 144) (see also Chapters 6, 9, and 11). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the village political head (*cacique*) was also the head of a powerful secret society in the Keres area, and he appointed both ritual and secular leaders (e.g., the Flint Society) (White 1930:613). At Zuni, political authority was held by a council of priests from the most important rain-making societies (Levy 1994:313). Schachner (2001:170) cited numerous studies of Southwestern rituals that depicted them as a primary pathway to power and an important means of legitimizing asymmetrical power relations (see also Levy 1994:313; Lamphere 2000:384, 389; Heitman 2016:476–7).

### *Tactics*

#### **Ideology**

In the publicly promoted ideology, ritual leadership roles were portrayed as onerous burdens. This is a common ideological leitmotif of insecure elites almost everywhere. However, in reality, ritual elites had the most power and resources (Ware 2014:53). Alternatively, it is entirely possible that real power holders in secret society sodalities chose their highest public figures on the basis of their poverty and ability to sustain hardships as a smokescreen for the actual power and benefits that members of the society enjoyed. This could effectively deflect accusations from disadvantaged community members that the members of secret societies were acting to obtain self-benefits rather than acting for the good of the community. Such tactics may be common in poorer transegalitarian communities where subsistence is more precarious and access to resources is more critical for survival. In these situations, maintaining an egalitarian façade and justifying socioeconomic inequalities on the basis of ritual knowledge can be of utmost importance when faced with a disadvantaged community majority who might forcibly demand equal access to resources. For instance, I have argued that the above tactics were behind the dominant lineage's selection of self-effacing ritual heads in the poor hill tribe Akha communities of Southeast Asia (Hayden 2016).

In Taos, the authority of religious and political leaders was argued to derive from their knowledge of sacred matters and ownership of the ritual paraphernalia needed to carry out rituals (Brandt 1980:142; 1994:15). Those who protested the system were viewed as “immature” and lacking the knowledge needed to govern or use power (Brandt 1977:25, 27). Public performances were used to demonstrate the sham extrahuman, supernatural abilities of members

derived from their ritual knowledge (Parsons 1939:440–2; Brandt 1994:16). While there was a public ideology of generosity, stinginess was positively valued by individuals (Brandt 1994:15). Similarly, there was a public rhetoric of society positions being a burden, like the burden of the cargo involving fasting and long pilgrimages. In reality, leaders controlled most power and critical resources such as land, structures, access to water, and trade (Brandt 1994:16–17; Ware 2014:53). It seems likely that the public portrayal of offices as burdensome (e.g., Parsons 1939:590) was merely a subterfuge to hide the real benefits of political office and to diffuse critiques. Perhaps the arduous fasting, abstinence, and pilgrimages helped to persuade the non-initiated that those controlling the ritual and political systems really were suffering, a feature that curiously continues into royal ruling families in Mesoamerica where kings and queens were expected to make offerings of their own blood in dramatic ways as part of their duties.

In the same vein, members promoted a fear of supernatural power (ritual knowledge and office holding), places (caves, shrines), and things (masks, power animals) as dangerous, and something to be avoided by most people, i.e., by those who could not afford to acquire the ritual knowledge needed to deal with powerful objects (Parsons 1939:311,347,590; Brandt 1994:17). Society members with sufficient ritual knowledge and training were also supposed to be able to transform themselves into other animals, especially bears which could be dangerous (Parsons 1939:135).

One of the major ideological tenets in the Pueblos was that society and clan ancestors as embodied in the *katsinas*, masks, and patron animals were the focus of supernatural contacts, especially as mediators for rain (Parsons 1939:135,163). Initiations into secret societies were portrayed as rebirths which conferred privileged access to these ancestors, especially in caves (Webster 1932:157; Parsons 1939:118,600; Nicolay 2008). As individuals who dealt with supernatural forces, some society members (in particular, the ‘clowns’) claimed privileges outside normal morality, including the use of black magic, the use of feces, killing at whim, mocking everything, acting contrarily, and generally doing whatever they wanted (Parsons 1939:130).

Members of the Keresan medicine societies were claimed to be medicine men simply by dint of membership (as well as abilities to memorize liturgies) and not on the basis of any demonstrated healing, psychic, or trance abilities. According to the ideology of the societies, only members had the power and secrets needed to cure (White 1930:611,616,618). That the above ideological claims of secret society members were not universally accepted is indicated by the many and severe enforcement measures used (see “Enforcement”) and by threats to cut off the heads of children who mocked the *katsinas* or took the risk of unauthorized visits to sacred shrines (Parsons 1939:52,311).

### Benefits and Threats to Communities

Reflecting the dominant functionalist view of archaeologists, McGuire and Saitta (1996:211 or 213) explicitly stated that the Pueblo “rituals are to benefit all people, plant, animal, and spirit life.” For Ware (2014:174) and Parsons (1939:115), this was manifested in terms of success in war, in hunting, in curing, in keeping the calendar, in obtaining favorable weather or good crops, in controlling dangerous spirits, and in amusements provided by clowns. Similarly, White (1930:604) stated that the main functions of secret society organizations were to cure people, to make rain, and to carry out birth, death, and solstice rituals (see also Levy 1994:313). Bad spirits were claimed to be exorcised from households and cattle, while droughts were also supposed to be dealt with in special rituals (Levy 1994:611,615). Society rituals were even claimed to reverse the direction of the sun at the solstices (Levy 1994:615). The Sun Father was appealed to at the winter solar ceremony to protect the community and to make members successful in hunting and warfare, while in the spring offerings were made at shrines to the Sun Father and the Earth Mother for community fertility (Ellis and Hammack 1968:31). Thus, secret societies claimed to provide a wide variety of important benefits to their communities, including protection from invented threats.

### Exclusivity

In Taos, only religious leaders possessed the secret sacred knowledge which gave them the right to exercise political power (Brandt 1980:142–3). Those of lower social rank were given shorter periods of initiatory training and not given access to deep secrets (Brandt 1977:23,44). In general, Ware (2014:x–xi) described social groups with special powers and hierarchies as based on ritual and religious knowledge. There were inclusive ritual societies such as the *Katsina* Cult and the so-called moities in the Eastern Pueblos; however, there were also exclusive secret societies usually composed of a small percentage of the male population (Ware 2014:45–6).

The moities in the Eastern Pueblos were not technically kinship groups as the name implies, but rather acted like basic-level secret societies that initiated all community members, according to Ware (2014:59). Moreover, the dominant groups were said to hold inclusive community rituals primarily in order to promote general acceptance of their dominant position, and they invited other non-kin groups to participate in order to obtain support and allies (Ware 2014:113). In the Western Pueblos, around two thirds of the lineages and clans did not own ceremonial property and of those, a third owned no land. In fact, lineage organizational principles were less important for low-ranked extended families or “lineages” (Ware 2014:99). Whiteley (1986:70) also emphasized the unequal access to ritual knowledge and the closely guarded secrets in secret societies, as well as the exclusive link to political power. In sum, in the Western Pueblos, individuals in low-ranked lineages and clans had

little chance to acquire ceremonial offices although they could become lower ranking members in some societies (Levy 1992:74).

### **Hierarchies**

In general, Brandt (1980:126–8; 1994:15) maintained that a major consequence of secrecy in sodalities was the establishment of status hierarchies based on access to knowledge communicated only in oral form, plus ownership of ceremonial property and the roles associated with it. In Taos, religious societies and their leaders were ranked and there was differential access to knowledge within and between the societies (Brandt 1980:133). The chiefs of ritual societies and the kivas constituted a council with twelve members, although this may have been an unusual case (Parsons 1936:79). Ware (2014:x–xi) also observed that the Pueblo secret societies had hierarchies based on ritual and religious knowledge, and these were particularly pronounced in the eastern areas. The Eastern Pueblos were highly centralized, had strong hierarchies between and within their secret societies that approached social stratification, and exerted political control via secret society rituals and knowledge backed up with control over resources and their ability to appoint ritual and secular leaders (Ware 2014:52–3, 67, 121; J. Ware, personal communication). They were the “most complex, centralized, top-down political structure in Western North America north of Mexico” (Ware 2014:121, citing Jorgenson 1980:222).

It is worth emphasizing that the ranking of the secret societies was probably not particularly stable in Chaco communities owing to “inherent tensions between the emergent hierarchy and older kinship-based institutions” (Ware 2014:191), and undoubtedly owing to varying fortunes in agricultural production, family demographics, deaths of charismatic leaders, and warfare. These appear to be common characteristics of most secret societies.

### **Roles**

In addition to kiva and society chiefs, specialist watchers observed rising and setting positions of the sun from fixed positions. These people were generally society leaders (Parsons 1939:115, 119, 121–3, 212, 246, 496, 502, 514, 533–7, 543, 554–7, 570–1, 743, 766, 882, 909) and seem to have existed in most if not all Pueblos (J. Ware, personal communication). There were also clowns, policers or enforcers, guards, errand runners, wood procurers, speakers for leaders, cooks, and special roles for people in charge of pipes, masks, bullroarers, fires, and sand painting (Parsons 1939:117–18, 125, 168–9). Guards for those entering caves were also reported by Ellis and Hammack (1968:33–4).

### **Public Displays**

In general, certain private rituals were followed by public dramatizations, ceremonies, or dances (Parsons 1939:477–8). Public performances by the societies

were regularly held to demonstrate their extrahuman abilities, to promote their ideologies including instilling a fear of supernatural power, to show off their economic and organizational powers, and to entertain viewers (Brandt 1994: 16–17). Demonstrations included fire walking, handling rattlesnakes, swallowing burning embers, flying, hot water tricks, making plants grow instantaneously, making objects dance or levitate, swallowing sticks, parachuting off cliffs in baskets, transformations of inanimate objects into living creatures, making rain or corn or fur fall inside houses, returning eaten animals or burned people to life, together with the appearance of various masked spirits (Parsons 1939:440–2). All such performances were putative “manifestations of power.” Communal curing ceremonies were also conducted by the societies (White 1930:611; Levy 1994:314). The final ceremony in society initiations was also open to the public. This involved a demonstration of the initiates’ new powers as manifested by handling burning coals or snakes (White 1930:612). The ceremonies following the winter solstice at Zuni were special performances featuring each kiva group in turn and then all kiva groups together (Parsons 1939:737). Shamanic demonstrations of power were features of public displays at the conclusion of initiations into Keresan societies (Levy 1994:312–13).

### **Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

Initiation in secret societies involved fasting, exposure to fear-inspiring objects or beings, and enduring pain of various types (Parsons 1939:600; White 1930:612; Brandt 1994:17). These practices probably helped induce altered or ecstatic states of consciousness in initiates. Parsons (1939:441,467) also described initiates as being “too crazed with excitement to be conscious of physical pain,” undoubtedly in part due to the whipping (sometimes with cacti) used in initiations. Levy (1994:309,311–13,315–17) has also documented the induction of altered states of consciousness via the ingestion of *Datura* or “medicine” in a Hopi medicine society. He documented powerful members of Zuni medicine societies becoming possessed by the Bear and “growling like the beasts they represent,” dancing in “wild and weird” fashions with violent actions (Levy 1994:312–13). Curing society priests were especially reputed for their abilities to transform themselves into bears and “act like a wild animal” (Parsons 1939:135).

Long pilgrimages and long periods of dancing also undoubtedly helped induce altered states.

### **Enforcement**

The Zuni killed people for revealing secrets of the *Kokko* (*Katsina*) Society (Webster 1932:188). Killing those who revealed that masked dancers were not spirits was also reported by Driver (1969:351). Parsons (1939:52) related that children who mocked *katsinas* were threatened with decapitation or could be whipped. Whipping was also used to maintain discipline and enforce ritual

rules (Parsons 1939:467). Society Bear shamans occupied positions as enforcers and “were thought to be very dangerous because they could kill anyone” (Levy 1994:316–17). Brandt (1980:136) referred to unspecified “sanctions” for divulging information to non-members. In Taos, the village judiciary was composed of secret society members and had the power to fine, imprison, whip, or expel anyone who threatened their authority (Brandt 1977:27; 1980:126–8, 141). This extended to the destruction of individuals or sometimes entire communities (e.g., Awatovi) which “fell away from the leaders and the appropriate practices” (Brandt 1994:17). Earlier in the twentieth century, Parsons (1936:76) reported that the Black Eyes Society would throw into the river people who came too close to their ceremonies, “so that people are afraid of them.” Public ridicule and accusations of sorcery (often resulting in death) were other common means of securing compliance. Elsewhere, war captains or clowns enforced work assignments, decisions, customs, and dancing roles (Parsons 1939:117, 124, 130). In Sia, those who did not fulfill their ceremonial obligations were supposed to die within four days (Stevenson 1894:14).

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

Typical rituals featured the use of masks, smoking, bullroarers, flutes, drums, rattles, feathers, shells, dancing, whipping, sprinkling corn meal, asperging, and feasting (Parsons 1939:686 and *passim*). Most sacred items were cached, rarely seen, and highly curated. As such they were rarely available for ethnographers to document, and the items or practices mentioned above should be viewed as only a partial list. They undoubtedly occur rarely in most archaeological deposits except in the cases of burials and ritual repositories some of which were probably in rock shelters or caves (see Chapter 10).

Masks made of leather and wood were the most important and precious ritual items in the *Katsina* Societies. They were worn to impersonate spirits, and those owned by descent groups were symbols of rank and status (Vivian et al. 1978:45, 61). Some masks had movable parts or were even like puppets (Vivian et al. 1978:51–3). Masks could be owned by individuals, by clans, or by societies (Parsons 1939:347). Deceased members of secret societies were said to live on in masks. Thus, wearing masks could be dangerous (Parsons 1939:163, 347) presumably owing to the power of the mask to possess the wearer. The Black Eyes Society of Taos had only two masks, which were kept in a *sipapu* cave of the Black Eyes six miles from the pueblo (Parsons 1939:163, 347).

Other sacred ritual items were various secret society and clan fetishes that were so powerful that they could only be seen or handled by ordained priests (J. Ware, personal communication). As such, they were not generally described by ethnographers.

Shells featured prominently in secret society rituals, especially abalone, olivella, cowrie, and scallop shells (Parsons 1939:331). Conch shell trumpets were blown by the Great Shell Society members, especially when the community was threatened by attack, but also to bring rain and other good things (Parsons 1939:331; Mills and Ferguson 2008:343–5). The conch trumpets were reputed to contain strong medicine that could kill. Gourd trumpets were also used (Vivian et al. 1978:53).

Spear- or arrowheads as well as occasional stone celts were repeatedly mentioned as objects on altars, and as fetishes or apotropaic items (Parsons 1939:161,558,586,687,692).

Rattles made of turtle shells, deer hoofs, or gourds were also used in all dances, as well as notched stick rasps, large drums, dance sticks, and feathers (Parsons 1936:107–8; 1939:384–5).

Bullroarers, flutes, whistles, and foot drums were all used in secret society rituals (Parsons 1939:377–381).

Quartz crystals were used at Zuni and at Keres to obtain second sight or to locate objects in patients' bodies (White 1930:609; Parsons 1939:330,716,729; Levy 1994:331). Certain pebbles or concretions were considered sacrosanct and to possess magical properties (Stevenson 1894:77,95,108; Parsons 1939:329,574). And between two and four were kept by most secret society members. More were held by higher ranking officials. Petrified wood was used by the War Society (Parsons 1939:329). Various sizes of stone sculptures of animals were kept by societies as patrons (Parsons 1939:334; Stevenson 1894:77,102), while clay figurines of animals were placed on altars and then discarded afterward with sweepings as “seed from which the real objects will grow” (Parsons 1939:574). Special ceramic bowls were made and used for pouring and drinking in society rituals, some with snake and cougar designs (Stevenson 1894). Other bowls were used to hold snakes.

Offerings at shrines usually consisted of prayer sticks, feathers, food (especially maize ears or meal), food images, weapons, and sandals (Ellis and Hammack 1968; see also Teague and Washburn 2013 on the sacred nature of sandals). Corn meal was sprinkled on everything considered sacred and was used to mark out tabooed areas around kivas during ceremonies (Parsons 1939:130 and *passim*).

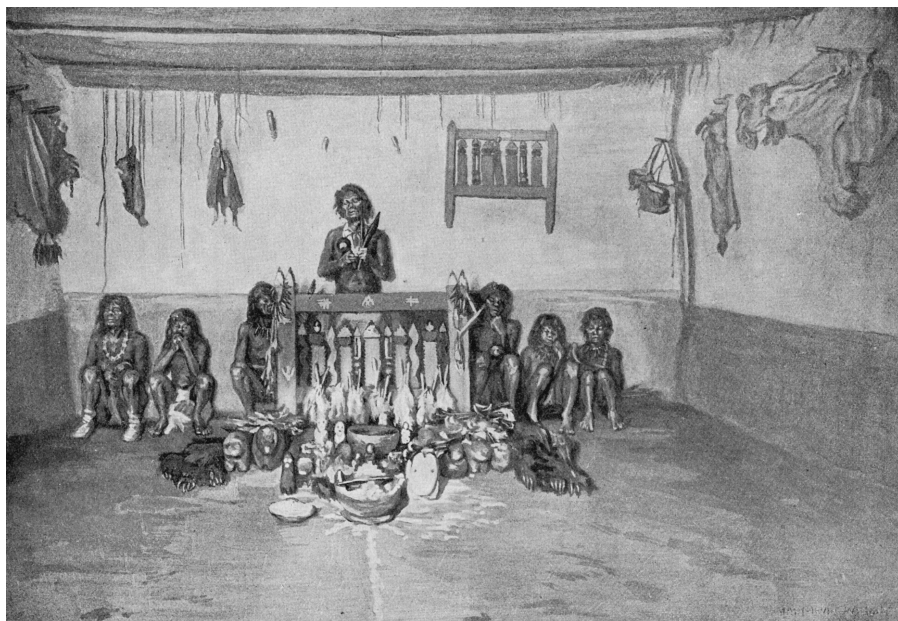
At Sia, the leg skins and claws of bears were used in a number of societies (Stevenson 1894:77) (Fig. 4.2).

Decorated poles, or “standards,” were set up outside kivas when ceremonies were underway. These were about 40 inches long with feathers and other items attached to them (Parsons 1939:606).

### **Structures and Ritual Landscapes**

Small kivas, sometimes called “lineage” kivas, were men's houses that served a variety of functions such as sodality chambers, performance spaces, clubhouses

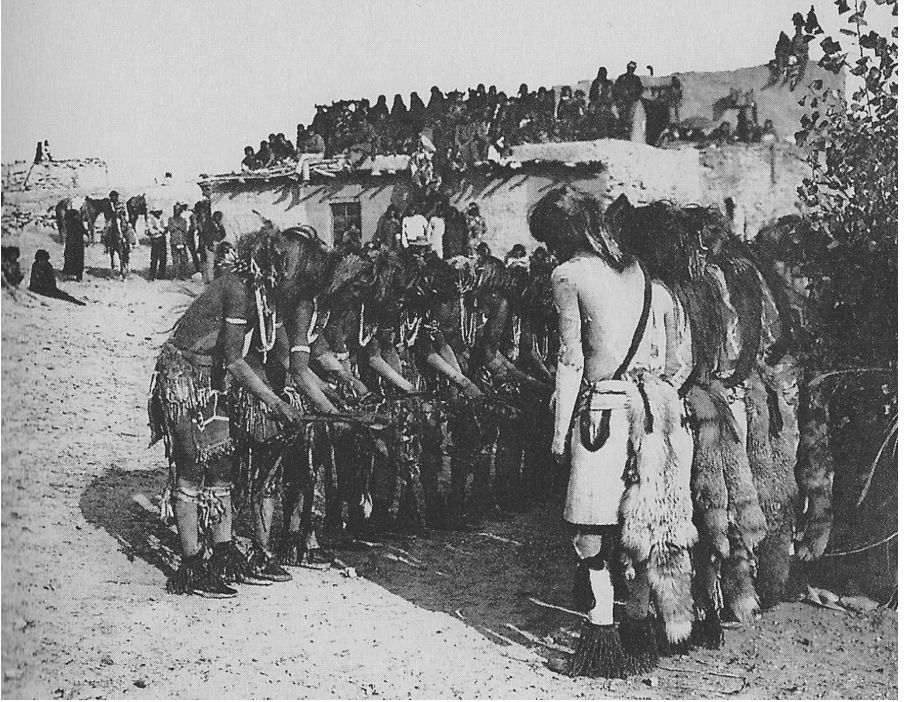




4.2 The ceremonial chamber and altar of the Pueblo Sian Knife Society set up for a rain ritual. Note the bear leg skins with claws on the ground to the far right and left of the altar and the stone animal sculptures immediately next to them. A ceramic bowl and human figurines are near the center (Stevenson 1894:Plate 23).

for initiated men, lounges, and workshops. Kivas were only used by selected members of the community, although in the Eastern Pueblos, the entire community was sometimes able to attend special performances in the large moiety kivas (Adler 1989:46). Most Eastern Pueblos did not have smaller kivas. Sodalities met in society houses or special society rooms that outwardly were identical to domestic residences, or they met in moiety great kivas within the pueblo (see Fig. 4.2; also Stevenson 1894; Parsons 1939:143–4,686; Brandt 1980:134–5). Secret “moiety rooms” occurred “off the main kiva” (Adler 1989:46). Curing societies could spend days or weeks in an “appointed house” (or in kivas) practicing songs and dances (Parsons 1939:731). After their first performances in members’ houses, societies also performed dances at private houses with women, children, and babies as the main audiences (Parsons 1939:737–8). The moiety great kivas served as ritual moiety chambers. Great kivas could accommodate large numbers of both men and women (J. Ware, personal communication).

In the Western Pueblos, ethnographic kivas were built and maintained by clans (Ware 2014:46). Enclosed plazas instead of great kivas were used for large public ceremonies (Ware 2014:69–70) (Fig. 4.3). Mindeleff (1891:119–22) observed that Hopi kivas had floors paved with flagstones, and that there was a platform at one end about 10–12 inches high on which visitors and women sat when they were invited to watch ceremonies. Greasewood



4.3 A public performance by the Hopi Snake Society (at left) and the Antelope Society (at right). Members are singing prior to engaging in displays of handling snakes. Secret society public displays were common everywhere. In Western Pueblos, they typically took place in plaza areas like this one (Curtis 1922).

was burned in the hearths because it gave off brighter light. Dorsey and Voth (1902:171) added that the platform was sometimes plastered and sometimes used for lounging, working, or eating by kiva members. Weaving cotton was a major activity by males in many kivas and most Pueblos (Smith 1972:121).

Monumental architectural constructions may reflect competition between groups within communities or perhaps competition between ritual sodalities, but perhaps also between secret societies in competition with corporate kin groups, a possible example being the prehistoric great houses (Ware 2014:128). Archaeologically, it is also worth noting that ritual structures were often destroyed, or desanctified by burning as part of ritual closing ceremonies (Ware 2014:169). Such practices might reflect competition between groups.

Outside the villages, there were a number of variously remote shrines, caves, and structures to which male leaders of secret societies made periodic retreats or pilgrimages and where they conducted their “private” work (Ortiz 1969:18–20; Brandt 1994:16–17). “Shrines themselves are dangerous places, taboo to all but the ceremonialists charged with visiting them,” although apparently some unauthorized individuals took the risk of visiting them (Parsons 1939:311). In terms of the locations of shrines, Ortiz (1969:18–20) described major shrines

at the edge of Tewa or up to a mile from the village. Shrines also occurred at progressively greater distances up to 15–80 miles from Tewa. Brandt (personal communication, 2015) indicated that some shrines were “within a reasonable distance of a village site,” usually with trails leading to them. Offerings were left at these shrines (e.g., prayer sticks, feathers, corn meal), and materials from the shrines could be used at ceremonies and then returned. She described other shrines as being “very distant,” up to 300–400 miles away, from which particular materials for rituals had to be obtained such as water from special springs.

While most shrines were in open-air locations – often on mountain tops or associated with rock circles, phallic stones (for female fertility), or rock art – some of them were located in caves or rock shelters, and some were roofed structures near villages where people spoke to spirits (Parsons 1939:308,574). One log structure used by the Sia Snake Society was six miles from the village and apparently was built with great effort owing to the lack of trees for many miles around (Stevenson 1894:86,90). This structure was 6 by 12 feet and included a fireplace. Several shrines were described as “circular stone enclosures with large central upright stones,” some of which had elongated stones symbolizing the “old stone people” of the underworld (Ellis and Hammack 1968:33; see also Parsons 1939:308). There was also “a point on an eastern mesa” where miniature clothes for the sun were deposited to help it return at the solstice, together with prayer sticks and miniature bows or javelins (White 1930:615).

I have only found one brief reference alluding to “bush ceremonies” for boys being initiated into Pueblo ritual societies (Parsons 1936:75).

### Caves

“The Pueblos feel that persons more closely approach the underworld when they meet, store paraphernalia, or deposit offerings in caves” (Ellis and Hammack 1968:30). “Any available cave or near-cave like a rock shelf will be used as a shrine” (Parsons 1939:308). Some *Katsina* rituals took place in remote caves viewed as sources of rain where ancestors could mediate between ritualists and supernatural powers (Nicolay 2008). Caves appear to have been used as shrines from late Archaic times (Nicolay 2008). Ellis and Hammack (1968:31–4) assembled a number of ethnographic observations from various Pueblos indicating that sacred caves were also viewed as *sipapu* openings and were associated with specific ritual societies from specific Pueblos. For instance, a cave near Jemez was “sacred to the important Underworld Chief’s Society.” Pecos had a cave that served as its *sipapu* or its sun shrine and was visited annually by its ceremonialists. And Cochiti ceremonialists used a cave where those entering had to be accompanied by a ritual guard. A number of other caves were used as sun shrines, some also attended by war captain guards for the priests entering to conduct rituals. Prayer sticks, feather bunches, bows or arrows, and food images or food offerings were commonly left in the caves.

Similarly, the Black Eyes Society of Taos and Laguna had a ritual *sipapu* cave six miles from the pueblo where they kept their precious society masks, scalps, and paraphernalia (Parsons 1936:76; 1939:311). A cave-like large fossil geyser cavity was one of the most important Laguna shrines and was used by the leading men of the Warrior Society for sun rituals (Parsons 1918:381). There were several cave shrines three miles east of Zuni as well as one used by the Hunter Society where animal heads were deposited (Parsons 1918:390; 1939:127,308). Caves were also used for ritual preparations for field fertility rituals (Parsons 1939:789) and for storing ritual paraphernalia (Stevenson 1894:89–90).

### **Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Organization**

In general, Ware (2014:14) considered that Pueblo societies were organized on the basis of pan-tribal secret sodalities. Initiation into a particular secret society normally took place in the Pueblo where the society originated (J. Ware, personal communication). While many roles, especially for leaders, may have been loosely hereditary in this organization, Ware (2014:91) observed that genealogies could be manipulated to fix clan deficiencies and that adoption or other forms of recruitment could also be used (see also Parsons 1939:114,154). Secret society members in the Western Pueblos were drawn from any clan, thereby cross-cutting kinship groups, a feature guaranteed by requiring “ceremonial parents” (Parsons 1939:47).

Ware (2014: x–xi citing Service 1962) also emphasized the cross-cutting ties at the inter-community level of secret societies. For instance, Parsons (1939:604,775) observed inter-Pueblo participation in initiations and dances. It seems likely that one consequence of these ritual connections and common ritual practices was that the Pueblos evolved as an interaction sphere. There were five different languages and ethnic groups unified by a common ritual culture (Ware 2014:56). Ware also cited Jorgenson’s (1980) cross-cultural study which documented a tendency for ritual sodalities to be multi-ethnic (Ware 2014:160–1,165). This underscores the use of secret societies by aggrandizers in creating a power base on a regional scale beyond kinship or local sociopolitical structures.

### **Power Animals**

Keresan medicine society members obtained their powers from bears, cougars, wolves, badgers, eagles, hawks, buzzards, snakes, porcupines, dragonflies, and similar animals or birds (White 1930:609; Parsons 1939:208–9, Table 2; Levy 1994:311,315–17). These power animals also included some mythical forms such as the horned water serpent.

### **Number of Societies**

Pueblos averaged five kivas per village in the Western Pueblos, and the kivas were for secret society ceremonies as well as council meetings and, at times,



other profane activities (Webster 1932:16–17, 156). The Sia had eight secret societies, and the Zuni had thirteen, some of which were open to both men and women (Stevenson 1894:73). The Hopi had multiple but variable numbers of kivas; Zuni, Acoma, and Picuris had six kivas; Keresan and Tewa pueblos had one or two kivas; most Tewa and southern Tiwa villages had one large kiva. Hopi males could join several secret societies (Ware 2014:95). In Taos, there were six kivas, with two societies sharing each kiva, at least theoretically (Brandt 1980:135). There were also an undetermined number of “society houses” (Brandt 1977:21fn). Four to eleven secret societies in Keresan pueblos are mentioned by White (1930:604) and Levy (1994:311). Around 1900, there were thirteen religious societies in Oraibi (Whiteley 1985:366).

### Proportion of Population

Ware (2014:45–6) noted a pattern in the Southwest that is common for many secret societies elsewhere in which all adults or males were admitted to a low level of ritual organization that was thus inclusive, as with the *Katsina* Cult or ritual moieties; although the *Katsina* was looked down upon (presumably by other societies) as a “poor man’s cult” open to everyone, even if the head priests were always from highly ranked lineages and clans (Parsons 1939:167). However, even there, a small percentage of males within the organization formed a voluntary and much more exclusive suborganization or parallel organization. Brandt (1994:17–18) estimated that there were no more than fifty fully ordained ceremonialists in most Eastern Pueblos. In Taos, there were only thirty-six active religious society leaders in all. Individuals could belong to more than one society (Brandt 1977:20, 22–4). Driver (1969:351) referred to “a small minority” that belonged to secret societies in the east, with each sodality having only six to twelve members. Ware observed (2014:53) that with greater power of the ritual sodality, access was “correspondingly restricted.” This relationship was probably true in most geographical areas where there were multiple secret society organizations, although few have addressed the issue as far as I am aware.

As argued when discussing “Motives” and “Ideology,” the all-inclusive societies and ceremonies were probably developed not to promote “social solidarity” or community integration, but rather to counter the power of the more exclusive secret societies, or in order to obtain acceptance or acquiescence from the general community to the domination of secret societies (Ware 2014:112–13). In the Hopi area, Whiteley (1985:366) reported that all adult men and women had to join some societies, but that this then made them eligible to join other societies. Whiteley made it clear that only about 30 percent of the clans owned ceremonies or land (Whiteley 1985:369–70). It seems evident that only individuals from the prime lineages – presumably with the most land and greatest ability to purchase ritual paraphernalia and

host ceremonies – dominated the higher offices and joined the most societies (Levy 1992:74).

On the other hand, elsewhere in the Southwest, Brandt (1980:135; see also Parsons 1939:112) reported that the uninitiated membership of societies was larger than the number of initiated members. Specifically, the poor were viewed as families who were disenfranchised economically, politically, and ritually. In Zuni, those with no ceremonial property or connections constituted more than half of the population. They did not belong to any society.

### **Sex**

Although the Zuni had some secret societies with both men and women (Webster 1932:17,218), women generally did not occupy managerial positions (Parsons 1939:114) and only men engaged in curing, although women could assist them (White 1930:611). Exclusively women's secret societies occupied secondary or supporting roles to male secret societies (Ware 2014:100). Women were permitted in Hopi kivas as spectators for at least some ceremonies. In Taos, Parsons (1936:80) stated that women were not members of kivas and there were no women's secret societies, although they ground maize for kiva events. Some years later, Brandt (1977:23; 1980:137) reported that the Taos women had their own societies, although these were few in number, and served auxiliary functions in kiva affiliations, including grinding corn, preparing food, and maintaining the kiva structures, but did not have access to the most esoteric information and did not have kiva memberships. I suspect that this was a common pattern in most Pueblos. In most areas women prepared food for the men and boys in secret societies. They also served as helpers in most male sodalities in the east. The Tewa had some secret societies for women (Ware 2014:174–5). According to Parsons (1939), most Eastern Pueblos had special women's societies who cared for the scalps and were an extension of the war societies. The Hopi had three exclusively female sodalities, and the Zuni had two. Sia women were allowed to join some societies (Stevenson 1894:75).

### **Age and Frequency**

In Taos, infants could be dedicated in a society, but this more generally took place around six years old, with formal initiation taking place between eight and twelve (Brandt 1977:23; 1980:135,137). Parsons (1936:45,75) observed that all infants, whether male or female, were promised to one of the six kivas in Taos, but that boys were formally “given” to the kiva societies around nine years of age. The training period varied from six to eighteen months depending on the intended role and rank, with lower ranks not having access to the deeper secrets. Since each society rotated in turn to use kivas for the duration of training and initiations, there were about six to eleven years between initiations into specific ritual societies (Parsons 1936:46). Elsewhere,

initiations occurred whenever there were enough candidates, about every four years, and initiations took place at the yearly ceremonies of the societies (Parsons 1939:603). Traditionally, boys and girls were initiated into the *Katsina* Cult in Hopi at between six and ten years of age (Ware 2014:47). Stevenson (1894:79,112) observed four- to five-year-old boys participating in important society rituals in Sia.

### Feasts

Feasts were prevalent aspects of most secret society rituals. They were part of curing ceremonies, initiations, and rain-making rituals (e.g., Parsons 1939:599,603,686,709–10,720).

### MESOAMERICA: COFRADIAS AND THE CARGO

It would take an extended analysis to determine whether some, all, or any of the *cofradia* and cargo organizations in Mesoamerica should be considered as secret societies or not, especially given the widely divergent interpretations of the functions of these organizations in the anthropological literature, for instance as wealth “leveling” institutions (e.g., Cancian 1965:82; Vogt 1969:262–4; Kirkby 1973:31) versus organizations to promote the self-interests of members (Hayden and Gargett 1990). Such a study is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, I think it is worth raising the possibility that at least some of these organizations in some areas and at some times functioned as secret societies. In this section, I therefore present a few of the characteristics of these organizations that initially seem to resemble secret societies.

Cofradias and cargo systems are often treated as variations of the same basic religious-political type of organization. As with secret societies in many other culture areas, the primary purpose of *cofradias* was the propitiation of ancestors, including deceased members of the organization (Bunzel 1952:249; Cook 2000:23; Christenson 2001). The *cofradia* saints were simply viewed as deified ancestors. Cargo members also took charge of relationships with other villages and higher-level political organizations. Both *cofradias* and cargoes were internally ranked, with four or more levels. There were few high positions and more low-level positions (Cook 2000:33). Women participated, but in auxiliary roles (e.g., cooking for feasts) that were always lower than men’s roles (Cook: 2000:36). Both the cargo organizations and the *cofradias* were intimately tied to the political leadership and structure of their communities. Members had to pay a fee to join, and costs increased as individuals rose in importance so that only the wealthiest, more elite community members attained the highest ranks and the poor were excluded (Reina 1966:100–2). Typically, one of the higher ranks had the responsibility for organizing and financing a major community feast for the patron saint. The successful completion of this task



presumably was required for advancement to subsequent higher levels in the organization. Such feasts typically were very competitive and involved lavish outlays of food, masked costumes, dances, fireworks, and other displays.

The stated role of the *cofradías* and cargo holders was to maintain proper relationships for the community with supernatural forces (Cook 2000:51), thereby protecting the community and bringing benefits to it in terms of “life-giving power,” good crops, and health. Thus, their dances featured the underworld and sacred animals. The décor in their sacred structures symbolized fertility and abundance spreading to the directions of the cosmos (Christenson 2001:7–8). Contact with supernatural forces was facilitated through the use of strong tobacco, alcohol, and probably other mind-altering substances, in addition to dancing and music which lasted for days.

There were both public processions or masked dances and more secret rituals sponsored by *cofradías* and cargo holders (Christenson 2001:7; Vogt 1970:98). Processions of saints’ statues from the *cofradía* house to the church and back strongly resembled early accounts of deity images kept in “rugged places, dark and secret caves,” brought out on special occasions and carried in processions to temples (Christenson 2001:2). Historically, such public processions were accompanied by fireworks, drums, and flutes. In addition to displaying powerful supernatural figures and the sumptuous benefits associated with them, in some areas they included displays of supernatural powers such as fire walking (Bricker 1989:232). Important ceremonies were held at key points of the year, such as the Year Renewal (New Year’s), the summer solstice, and at harvest times (Cook 2000:24,36–7). Feasts were provided by cargo officials or the political head of the village.

*Cofradías* owned significant land and livestock used for their own ceremonies and feasts (and these were worked or tended by villagers). Land and livestock were also lent to others, usually at 100 percent interest (Foster 1953:19; Cook 2000:27; Hayden and Gargett 1990). In addition, *cofradías* collected food and funds from village households for their celebrations and probably profited in other unreported ways (Carrasco 1961:493; Hayden and Gargett 1990).

*Cofradías* had special structures in their villages to house images of their saints and other paraphernalia and to use for meetings and meals (Cook 2000:36; Christenson 2001).

### *Caves*

In Santa Eulalia (Huehuetenango, Guatemala) and other locations with sacred caves, only the *alcaldes* were permitted to enter the caves together with those whom they approved. Trespassers not only faced supernatural sanctions resulting in madness, illness, or death, but could be killed (Brady and Garza 2009:76). This was a general pattern throughout the area so that caves everywhere were

considered dangerous places (Monaghan 1995:104–5; Christenson 2001:6). The *alcaldes* in Santa Eulalia appeared to conform to the *cofradia* model of secret societies and obtained considerable support from their community for all their material needs and those of their families. New *alcaldes* were elected by sitting *alcaldes* and they wielded considerable power in all domains (Garza and Brady 2009). Caves were used for some of their rituals, and the structures that they used in villages appear to have been viewed as symbolic caves which were used in the same manner (Christenson 2001). Early accounts of the Maya indicate that clothed images of deities were kept in caves surrounded by offerings of food, drink, candles, incense, pots, and other items. Caves were also the abode of ancestors or powerful lords of the earth and the source of blessings, fertility, water, and life (Nash 1970:23; Deal 1987:174; Christenson 2001). The same was true of buildings used by *cofradías* (Christenson 2001). At least in Santa Eulalia, and I suspect more generally, the deepest parts of the cave were the most sacred areas where visions were obtained, and these areas were only accessed by the highest ranking *alcaldes* or those obtaining special permission. The areas nearest the entrance were for prayers and petitions. One report stated that those entering the caves brought tribute and that animal sacrifices and drinking were part of the ceremonies (Brady and Garza 2009:77). The special, painted deep alcoves in some Upper Paleolithic caves (e.g., Lascaux, Font-de-Gaume) appear to follow the same pattern (see Chapter 10).

Other remote locations were also used for important rituals by leading members, especially mountain tops and other places considered sacred (Vogt 1969; 1970:98).

There were generally multiple ranked *cofradías* in each village, numbering from four to ten, although they were usually linked into a coherent yearly ritual system (Christenson 2001:6). There was only one cargo system per village, although officials at different levels often adopted responsibilities for honoring different saints. Major cargo ceremonies involved ritual specialists from a regional center and outlying villages, thereby ritually integrating regions (Vogt 1970:98). Feasts, attended by high-ranking cargo members and shamans, were held at the house of the highest ranking cargo holder (Vogt 1970:98).

Thus, all in all, Mesoamerican *cofradías* and cargo organizations appear to have strong similarities to other secret societies. Driver (1969:358–9) also made some general observations on the especially rich occurrence of ritual sodalities among the Aztecs (e.g., the *calmecac*, ritual schools for elites) and their strong roles in Aztec astronomy, calendars, and politics, and, one might add, human sacrifices and cannibalism.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# PLAINS SECRET SOCIETIES

### INTRODUCTION

#### *General Characteristics of Plains Societies*

Although there was a strong egalitarian rhetoric that pervaded most Plains societies and ethnographies, Zedeño et al. (2014) have pointed out that there were many non-egalitarian and culturally complex aspects, replete with chiefs, slaves, pronounced wealth differences, political power, and hereditary ranks. Plains ethnic groups therefore appear to represent mainly transegalitarian societies since they lacked regional political authorities and therefore did not generally fit the archaeological definition of chiefdom societies in spite of having leaders referred to as “chiefs.” As such, they might have had good potential for supporting secret societies, which, in fact, they did, as well as other organizations such as age grades and purely social dance societies or practical social organizations. It was probably the regional participation in secret societies, sometimes across ethnic boundaries, that was in large part responsible for the creation of pronounced ritual similarities between groups occupying the Plains, resulting in a large, multi-ethnic interaction sphere (per Caldwell 1964). A relatively uniform Plains environment and uniform economies together with high levels of mobility were undoubtedly also contributing factors in creating cultural uniformity throughout the area (Fig. 4.1).

There was considerable variability in the basic structure of the sodalities of the Plains, ranging from dance societies without any recorded esoteric or

sacred content to organizations with carefully guarded, powerful, esoteric ritual secrets; from shamanistic societies to almost purely warrior societies (although war parties of most groups carried sacred war bundles, special lances, or other supernaturally imbued items; see, e.g., Skinner 1916d:687); from societies that gave gifts to new members, to no-cost memberships, to very expensive memberships; from highly exclusive societies (restricted to chiefs or warriors) to all-encompassing (especially age-graded) societies; from dances or events organized by individuals to those organized by complex societies with a number of specialized roles or positions. The following discussion will emphasize those sodalities that most closely approximated the definition of secret societies presented in Chapter 1.

Wissler (1916a:857) observed that there were basically two types of Plains societies: shamanistic organizations and entertainment societies. Those that correspond most closely to secret societies were “shamanistic organizations” (in contrast to individual shamanic practices). Others have made similar distinctions (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:459). In general, shamanistic organizations originated from shamans’ visions and had rituals with “medicine” powers. However, Fortune (1932:2) argued that visions for many members were not personal visions but tropes handed down within the society. In these cases, visions were said to have occurred in the past and knowledge of the vision contents were obtained via membership. For Fortune, personal visions were irrelevant to membership. Women were not involved in shamanistic societies except as singers, and the poor were never admitted (Wissler 1916c:62–3,70).

Shamanistic societies were characterized by governing councils that controlled admission; shamanistic performances commonly featuring fire handling, fire walking, putting hands into boiling water, or other extraordinary feats to demonstrate spirit powers; and yearly renewal ceremonies (Wissler 1916a:858–60). Supernatural power usually derived from the purchase of sacred bundles, but, to a lesser degree, could be obtained from individual visions and the creation of personal bundles (Bowers 1965:136,282,285; Bailey 1995:45). Masquerades as animal patrons were often associated with shamanistic organizations since shamanic power was largely dependent on animal patrons. Shamanistic organizations were prominent among the Pawnee and probably the Hidatsa, Mandan, and other groups (Wissler 1916a:858–60). Many shamanistic groups incorporated pronounced warrior elements with highly developed ritualistic aspects of war, particularly the production of shamanic protection for warriors in battles (Wissler 1916a:861,866; 1916b:64; Bowers 1965:220).

Wissler (1916b:vi) observed three relatively common characteristics of Plains military and secret societies: (1) their military or policing roles; (2) the ranking of societies for different age cohorts; and (3) an emphasis on “no flight” vows in battles. However, other common characteristics included a focus on special dances, songs, and objects, especially medicine bundles, pipes, fetishes, or

lances/standards. In addition, prolonged singing, drumming, and dancing, together with painful skin piercing or excision procedures, undoubtedly created varying degrees of altered states of consciousness for many secret society ceremonies.

Outward purposes of societies could change over time. For example, the Chiefs' Society of the Ogalala was thought to have originated as a war society organized by shamans, but changed to emphasize feasting and dancing under pacification (Wissler 1916c:37). As was true elsewhere (e.g., on the American Northwest Coast and in California), the power in secret society ideologies was portrayed as dangerous and not to be played with, hence ceremonies were largely quite solemn (Fortune 1932:138,141).

Some observers seemed to trivialize the supernatural or ritual nature of secret societies by noting that there were no profound secrets that were revealed to members. As Fortune (1932:72) observed, the only secrets conveyed among the Omaha were the contents of stock visions of the society and the use of herbs. For other ethnographers, the only secret seemed to be that masked spirit impersonators were really just men or that initiates were not really killed and brought back to life. But, as Bellman (1984) argued, the secret of many societies did not really lie in the liturgical content or even in the identification of the impersonators, since everyone knew of the fiction but agreed to publicly uphold it, much as the fiction of Santa Claus is maintained in public for small children. For Bellman, the real secret consisted of how to create and maintain such public fictions, how to use the masks in those contexts, how to impersonate spirits, how to run such societies, and how to wield power.

Age-graded associations – often strongly linked to warrior roles – were widespread on the Plains, and have sometimes been referred to as secret societies, even displaying some of the basic characteristics (e.g., purchase of memberships with increasing costs commensurate with increasing age levels; individual instruction; initiations; use of rituals; exclusive membership; the acquisition of supernatural powers from regalia, songs, and dances; memberships that cross-cut kinship and local affiliations; graduated ranking between and within societies; and the surrender of one's wife to ceremonial fathers; Bowers 1965:175,208–9; Mails 1973:46,55,78). Although all males were expected to join one age-grade association, many boys did not join (Bowers 1965:211; Peters 1995:52). Poor boys often stayed out of Hidatsa age-grade societies because they could not afford the expenses, while wealthy boys took positions of honor (Bowers 1965:136). In addition, lazy, cowardly, or indifferent individuals could be expelled from age-grade groups (Bowers 1965:455). To what extent age-grade associations might be considered secret societies is an open question. For the purposes of this study, I will only consider the other, more definite, more voluntary and restrictive associations as secret societies. Warrior societies constituted another ambiguous class of organizations. They were often referred to as “secret societies” owing to their voluntary nature, the

costs involved in initiation, the internal rankings, and the reliance on supernatural claims to protect individuals in battle (e.g. Mails 1973:55).

Age grades obviously constitute alternative structural means for cross-cutting kinship affiliations, as do strictly warrior societies, dancing, other social-based societies, and associations of craft specialists. These forms of sodalities do not appear to have had the same potential for creating centralized or regional political, social, and economic control that secret societies make possible. Moreover, many of the typical secret societies had strong military elements. Thus, where the dividing line between secret societies and purely military organizations should be drawn is unclear.

## OVERVIEW

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

Some of the accounts of secret societies on the Plains were quite graphic in describing motives of members for joining, even characterizing them as “extortionists” acting out of greed for their own self-interests. Ambitious individuals who could not gain admittance to the more powerful secret societies often started their own versions of such societies, resulting in a multiplicity of organizations of varying power.

#### **Sources of Wealth**

Graft and extortion seem to have been common means of acquiring wealth by society members, especially for the “doctoring” members who claimed to be able to cure sicknesses but were often thought to make people sick in order to charge them high fees for the cures. Food and paraphernalia were habitually requisitioned from families for secret society feasts and ceremonies. People who sought society help had to provide a feast, a horse, and gifts. Dance and ceremony performers expected spectators to give them gifts, and members of some groups could steal with impunity. Shamans were given a horse after successful battles, and lower ranking members paid heavily to obtain ritual knowledge.

#### **Political Connections**

Some secret societies, like the Society of Chiefs, were exclusively for chiefs, while other societies varied in membership. Among the Ponca, chiefs had to belong to most of the Ponca secret societies and tried to acquire leading roles in them. Some societies had judicial powers. At least among the Osage, it was clear that the positions of secular chiefs were created by secret society leaders (Bailey 1995:74).

*Tactics***Ideology**

Throughout most of the Plains, medicine bundles were claimed to have dangerous powers that secret society members could use to obtain success in war and other pursuits. All of these uses were portrayed as being necessary for survival and thus were altruistic and for the good of the community, although self-interests usually dominated actions.

**Esoteric Knowledge**

Secret society members also claimed to hold secrets that enabled them to make supernaturally charged medicines or bundles that could be used to kill and revive people, perform supernatural feats, impose their will on women, and make corn grow or animals reproduce.

**Benefits for the Community**

Secret societies maintained that they could cure people, confer success in war, affect the weather, provide good harvests and hunting, promote prosperity, get people out of trouble, and enforce social conventions. Some also curried community support by giving to the poor.

**Exclusiveness**

The poor never seem to have been admitted to secret societies on the Plains, while the highest ranks with the highest ranked bundles were the most exclusive positions. Some societies only admitted the highest shamans or those of very high rank or the wealthy from high classes. Prowess in combat and membership in certain families could also be used as membership criteria.

**Offices and Roles**

Secret societies usually had a few heads or directors with assistants and a variety of specialized roles.

**Initiation Fees**

Candidates for initiation had to pay substantial amounts for their ritual training, for any ritual knowledge or paraphernalia received, and had to give a series of feasts. Costs often resulted in heavy borrowing. Items used as payment included meat, horses, clothes, robes, blankets, pipes, regalia, tomahawks, feasts, the sexual service of wives, and even the wives themselves.

**Displays**

Supernatural power was displayed both in secret societies and in public, consisting of supernatural power duels, fire handling and walking, placing



embers in mouths, snake handling, juggling, immersing hands in boiling water, crazy mental states, public dances or processions, and magic tricks such as making plants or trees spring up from the ground. At some ceremonies, booths were set up by each society, apparently to solicit new members.

### **Ecstatic Experiences**

Initiates or those seeking greater supernatural power fasted and were often deprived of sleep. They could also be given mescal beans and spent long periods dancing, resulting in “crazy” possession states. Piercing skin or muscle, dragging buffalo skulls by thongs inserted through the skin, and cutting off flesh were common procedures for obtaining visions.

### **Enforcement**

A major role of some secret societies was to punish offenses against social customs and presumably secret society rules. High-ranking members were also reputed to be able to kill people with spells, and they were thus greatly feared. Revelation of society tricks was said to result in death.

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

In addition to the medicine bags and bundles, secret societies generally used pipes, drums, animal costumes (often with horns, fox mandibles, owl elements, or other animal parts), decorated spoons, lances or arrows (with stone points), whistles made from large bird bones, deer hoof rattles, exotic shells and stones, tomahawks, bone rasps, scratching sticks, mescal beans, buffalo skulls, coyote or raven skins with heads, eagle wings, loon elements, and mud sculptures.

#### **Structures**

In some areas, earth lodge structures that could hold five to six hundred people were erected for secret society ceremonies (Fig. 5.1). In one area, an earthen ring about 20 meters in diameter was constructed. In other areas, tipis were used, located either in the center of villages or in the woods at some remove from villages. Hill tops or solitary tents or caves were used for fasting and visions or social rituals.

#### **Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Organization**

Loosely hereditary membership in some areas guaranteed memberships that cross-cut kinship groups. Social and ritual gatherings often included



Fig. 5.1 Principal participants in a re-enactment of an Arikara Medicine Society ceremony put on for Edward Curtis in front of their ritual lodge (Curtis 1909).

twelve or thirteen villages, thus constituting regional organizations. Some secret societies even incorporated members from different ethnic groups.

### **Power Animals**

Bears and buffalos were the most common power animal patrons, although rattlesnakes, mythical water monsters, and ghosts were among other patrons that conferred supernatural power.

### **Number of Societies and Members**

All Plains groups appear to have had multiple secret societies, usually five to twelve major societies plus an unspecified number of minor ones. Minor societies probably had very few members, but major societies appear to have had between twenty and fifty members drawn from populations numbering in the hundreds or thousands.

### **Sex and Age**

Wives of initiates often became nominal members of the same secret societies. Their roles were primarily as singers, cooks, and sometimes providers of sexual services. There were also a few women's secret societies which had male singers. Boys began to be initiated into secret societies from seven to fifteen years old, although high-ranking positions (or entry into very exclusive societies such as the Chiefs' Society) were not achieved until thirty or forty-five years old. There are records of girls being members of societies as young as two to eight years old.

**Feasts**

It appears that virtually all ceremonies and initiations were accompanied by feasts, including some that were given for the general public.

**Frequency**

Major ceremonies were generally held once a year.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

*Motives and Dynamics*

In one of the few observations on motives behind the formation of secret societies, Murie (1916:558) notes that the bundle societies of the Pawnee were primarily for the elevation and pleasure of their members, as well as for hunting and military success. Fortune (1932:136) description was more frank about members of the Omaha Water Monster Society, who were taught how to gain wealth and to take whatever they wanted. It was commonly thought that members of the shamanistic doctoring societies sometimes used their powers to make people sick in order to obtain large payments for curing them (Fortune 1932:32,50). In fact, Fortune (1932:89,108) described such doctors as “rapacious” and “extortioners,” and as even trying to kill rivals to protect their financial interests or being willing to see family members die so that the ambitious could acquire power in secret societies (Fortune 1932:56–7,103,108). Put bluntly,

The power members had was not exercised for any social function but for their personal aggrandizement. They collected sheer “graft” freely, not only profiting by illnesses and the popular conviction that doctors could turn illness into death at will, but also collecting in advance on occasion.

(Fortune 1932:86)

Members of the Omaha *Midewiwin* Society were taught to harden themselves to violence and meanness (Fortune 1932:106).

Thus, these societies were not established for the common good by groups of communitarian visionaries, but rather their establishment created social divisions, exploitation, and strife, with disputes between members and rival groups, as well as resentment from non-members (Fortune 1932:87,108,136). As seems to have been the standard practice in many secret societies, the public personas of members were demur and friendly. They expressed rhetorics of serving the good of the community, whereas in private, Fortune (113) found their arrogance appalling. Similarly, the rhetoric promulgated in public was that the secret societies were egalitarian, open, free, and democratic, whereas in practice they were strongly aristocratic, “but definitely secretively so,” with hereditary privileges (6,54,158).

In general, Wissler (1916c:38) described a more or less constant process of individuals inventing new medicines with supernatural powers and trying to obtain followers to organize new secret societies. Various cults were often sold from one group to another or they were introduced by individuals; however, they were frequently not generally adopted (Wissler 1916a:867). For instance, the Hot Dance (including dancing on hot coals, putting hands in boiling water, and putting hot embers in mouths) was purchased by the Crow from a neighboring group for 600 horses (Lowie 1916c:201; 1916f:252). This included the regalia and an undisclosed amount of dog meat. The *Midewiwin* Society of the Omaha was obtained from neighboring groups, and it seems that societies in general were transmitted by purchase from tribe to tribe (Fortune 1932:88,91). New bundle rituals were constantly being introduced in Hidatsa communities as well (Bowers 1965:287). The accounts cited above document the highly fluid and dynamic nature of the ritual organizations on the Plains. Although entire societies or individual features of them could be bought and sold, all societies were supposed to have originated from visions of shamans concerning medicine powers (Bowers 1965:62).

In a rare, insightful observation, Murie (1916:579) noted that “there were at all times ambitious men unable to attain membership in the regular organizations.” Such men began their own societies and became imitators and sometimes rivals of the established societies. This provides a key to understanding the origin and proliferation of secret societies and why there were often multiple societies in communities. It also illustrates the kinds of people (i.e., the ambitious) who originated these societies.

### *Political Connections*

The Omaha *Midewiwin* Society was exclusively composed of chiefs (Lowie 1916d:888; Fortune 1932:51–2), while several of the Ogalala secret societies had judicial powers (Wissler 1916c:65). Aspiring Ponca chiefs had to belong to most or all of the Ponca societies and obtain leadership positions as well as giving feasts (Skinner 1916c:783).

The heads of all the Blackfoot secret societies met with the chief, who selected two societies to perform policing duties during their aggregated village phase and during the communal buffalo hunts (Wissler 1916d:367).

The priests of the three most important pan-tribal Osage secret societies constituted the village councils and were the ultimate power or authority of the village. *They created the positions of the secular chiefs* as well as the social, ritual, and political frameworks that were used to govern communities (Bailey 1995:44,70). However, these social and ritual parameters may have only applied to elites since their ideology and beliefs were distinct from the common folk

(278–80). At least among the Osage, it was clear that the positions of secular chiefs were created by secret society leaders (74).

### *Wealth Acquisition*

Some, if not all, of the major Ogalala secret societies habitually requisitioned food and ritual paraphernalia from households, especially rich households, for their feasts and ceremonies (Wissler 1916c:17,21,45). In addition, people who sought help from the societies (e.g., for cures) had to provide feasts (especially feasts featuring dog meat), sweat baths, and a horse. Similarly, shamans were given a horse after successful raids, presumably for their supernatural help (Wissler 1916c:89,91). Similar requisitioning practices for public dances were reported in the 1790s by Trudeau (2006:204) for most of the Upper Missouri River region.

Among the Hidatsa, men were paid for instruction in ritual matters as well as for selling ritual bundles, resulting in heavy gifting by young men to older members (Bowers 1965:138,289,323). In the prestigious and costly Earthnaming Society, standard bundle transfers required the giving of a hundred buffalo robes, a hundred pairs of moccasins, feasting foods for all members for four days, as well as bags of pemmican, plus payments to those playing special roles (Bowers 1965:423,437–8,443). It took a year to prepare these gifts. Public fasting and the dragging of buffalo skulls (by ropes attached to bones thrust through dancers' flesh) were used as criteria for choosing new members, so that families generally gave gifts, presumably to secret society officials, at such events (Bowers 1965:137,426,438). Bundle transfers of the Stone Hammer Society were credited with the power to put people to sleep so that secret society members could steal from them (Lowie 1916f:249). Members of Mandan women's (and probably other) societies sang outside warriors' tipis for gifts (Lowie 1916f:325). Some societies were also paid to perform dances for crops or battles (Bowers 1965:346–7).

Members of several Blackfoot secret societies, like the Bears, could take any meat that they saw. They also received gifts, and solicited food or gifts by dancing or performing ceremonies in front of tipis in their camp, a practice that seems to have been widespread (Wissler 1916d:384,387).

Members of Pawnee bundle societies performed in front of leading households in order to obtain gifts. Spectators were also expected to provide gifts at the major ceremonies of the Medicine Men's Society. Afterward, the gifts were divided up by the members (Murie 1916:558,600).

The Buffalo Tail Society of the Iowa obtained food from community households for their feasts, while initiates in the Mystery (Animal) Society had to pay high prices to obtain ritual knowledge after joining (Skinner 1916d:693,713).

The meetings of Omaha secret societies “made demands on the accumulated wealth ... of the family” owing to the food needed for feasts and gifts expected at ceremonies (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:212–13). Members of the doctoring societies received heavy payments for curing people. Often three or four such doctors were involved (Fortune 1932:32,39). In one case, the fee for curing a wounded person involved horses, robes, bear-claw necklaces, eagle feathers, embroidered clothes, and other items (63). In addition, when meeting together in camps, members of at least one curing society could take meat from any boiling kettle in the camp which they did with their bare hands (80). Members of the Water Monster Society were taught how to obtain wealth and to take whatever they wanted (136). As previously noted, it was commonly believed that society doctors sometimes used their powers to make people sick in order to receive payments for curing them (32,50) and such doctors were considered “rapacious” “extortioners” (103,108).

### *Tactics*

#### **Ideology**

In general, it was claimed that members of secret societies acquired supernatural powers that brought them success in war (even making them invincible in counting coup – the practice of touching an enemy or other risky acts without being harmed), as well as in hunting, amorous affairs, appropriating the goods of others, and in revenge. In many cases, these powers were portrayed as derived from the ownership of ritual bundles or other paraphernalia and knowledge. Survival and success were claimed to depend on acquiring supernatural power via rituals, ceremonial purchases, fasting, and vision quests largely in the context of secret societies. Loss of supernatural force supposedly led to failure or death (Bowers 1965:282,285).

In the metaphysics of most groups, the earth and the cosmos were depicted as governed by a mysterious power that pervaded everything. Secret society priests presented themselves as men of this mysterious power, which had to be supplicated to bestow its blessings and help in order for people to survive in the world and overcome enemies. This resulted in a constant need for rituals throughout life which usually had to be performed by secret societies. On this basis, secret society members demanded respect for themselves, their overall ideology, and the secret societies in general (Bailey 1995:30,34,45).

In public rhetoric, Ogalala secret society members were supposed to be altruistic and philanthropic, perhaps similar to the medieval European code of chivalry (both as an ideal for public display and as an ideal often broached). Such claims were frequently elite tropes in transegalitarian and chieftdom societies and usually did not reflect the true intentions or motives of those involved (see Hayden 2014). Productive rich people were ideally supposed to give most of their wealth to their dependants and the poor (Wissler 1916c:18,20,64). It is

telling that Wissler's informants were all people of high rank (Wissler 1916c:67) who must have had vested interests in publicly emphasizing the beneficial roles of the societies and their own allegedly altruistic actions.

The most important women's society of the Mandan (the White Buffalo Cow Society) claimed to have supernatural powers to bring buffalo herds to the communities as well as to increase the fertility and abundance of game animals by using a sacred white robe. Other women's societies were supposed to make the corn grow in abundance through their sacred knowledge of mysteries and rituals (Lowie 1916f:332,338,347), while some Hidatsa women claimed that the Corn Spirit resided in their bodies (Bowers 1965:347). Otherwise, the military roles of men's societies seem to have been similar to the Hidatsa (Bowers 1965:294).

Medicine bundles were portrayed as the source of supernatural power for members of Omaha and other secret societies, making it dangerous to deal with the bundles or to cross anyone possessing one. In general, the power in Omaha secret societies was presented as dangerous so that ceremonies were always solemn affairs (Fortune 1932:138,141; see also Bailey 1995:47). Displays of supernatural powers were said to involve powerful forces that could injure spectators so that spectators were kept at a distance (Will 1928:62), perhaps so as not to be able to observe the putative supernatural feats too closely (see "Public Displays"). There were claims of supernatural retributions for owning but neglecting bundles which had to be renewed periodically with costly rituals that left families propertyless (Bowers 1965:332). The doctors who owned bundles were avoided in travels, especially if they were angry or annoyed, because of their supernatural powers (Fortune 1932:30–1,71). Some society members were reputed to be able to transform themselves into bears (Fortune 1932:83). The bear dance ceremony of the Ute was ostensibly held to help bears and to communicate with the dead (Lowie 1916b:823,825).

One of the more distinctive and blatantly self-serving ideological aspects of Plains ritual was the claim – undoubtedly made by high-ranking society members – that sex could be used to transfer supernatural powers from an older ritualist to a selected wife of an initiate and thence to the initiate (Bowers 1965:451,455). Among other things, husbands of these wives expected or hoped to obtain long life, success, and political support, or at least these were implied benefits.

### **Esoteric Knowledge and Power**

In general, stage-magic tricks were employed to persuade spectators that performers possessed esoteric knowledge and supernatural powers (see "Public Displays"). However, at least the Osage men of knowledge monitored the movements of the sun, moon, and stars to discover how they influenced



procreation and life on earth (Bailey 1995:30). I suspect that this was a fairly widespread practice. Osage priests deliberately restricted knowledge and hid meanings with metaphors (82); they claimed to have the exclusive knowledge needed to control and use power objects and bundles, knowledge lacked by the uninitiated (62).

In addition, the basis of the Ogalala Chiefs' Society was the knowledge to make powerful medicines to protect individuals in battle (Wissler 1916c:38). Dancers in the Elk Cult claimed to have magical power over targeted individuals, especially women, when they were flashed by mirrors attached to dancers' costumes. Members claimed the special privilege of stealing women by dancing, feasting, singing, and making special medicines (Wissler 1916c:87).

Fire walking was part of the Bear Cult of the Eastern Dakota (Lowie 1916a:126), while members of cults were pursued and "killed" by members of the Elk Society, after which they were brought back to life (Lowie 1916a:117).

Lowie (1916f:236) stated that the Hidatsa societies were primarily war and social organizations that did not involve any esoteric elements. However, he portrayed the regalia as sacred and provided origin myths for the societies. In addition, at least some of them made war medicines and had enough supernatural powers to be able to put embers in their mouths, to put their hands in boiling water, or to put people to sleep. As in other groups, certain rituals and societies were credited with the power to call buffaloes for the hunt. For the Hidatsa, the elder leaders of the powerful Earthnaming Society claimed to be able to confer the supernatural power to call buffaloes to a woman. This was performed by eight to ten of them copulating with her (Bowers 1965:437,451).

The Mandan women's societies had a clearly sacred and mystery character in terms of their roles in providing food, particularly in attracting buffalo herds or promoting the abundance of other game, and making corn grow productively. They also had a militaristic aspect probably involving protective magic (Lowie 1916f:324,332-3,338,347). Women sweated or were brushed after rituals to eliminate spirits (Lowie 1916f:338).

The Kit-Fox Society of the Blackfoot was reputed for its powerful medicines and secret sacred ceremonies, while members of the Horn Society also had secret ceremonies that made them powerful and feared, especially with their reputed power to kill people by using their spells and poppets to the extent that it was considered dangerous to even talk about members of the society. Members of the women's societies were also supposed to have magical powers derived from horns, and were therefore also feared (Wissler 1916d:399,411,416,434). Societies with older men generally tended to be more religious and less militaristic (Wissler 1916d:367).

The bundle-based societies of the Pawnee claimed esoteric powers to bring buffalo herds if properly used by their priestly owners. Bustles and medicine bags also had magical powers (Murie 1916:555,575,641). Members of the Pawnee Medicine Men's society claimed to have the power to kill people and then bring them back to life (Murie 1916:603), as well as performing a number of supernatural "tricks" involving instantaneous growth of plants and imperviousness to fire (see "Public Displays"). The Society of Chiefs, with members from thirteen Pawnee villages, was highly secretive so that no information is known about them (Murie 1916:556).

As noted in the discussion of ideology, medicine bundles were considered the source of supernatural power for members of Omaha secret societies (Fortune 1932:138,141). Initiation into these societies involved the passing of power from a member to a novice, power that ultimately originated from a supernatural patron (Fortune 1932:37).

The Arikara men's societies were predominantly militaristic, while the women's Goose Society promoted maize fertility, performed field blessings, and magically materialized maize kernels from people's eyes (Lowie 1916e:656,676-7).

Members of the Iowa Mystery (Animal) Society obtained power from individual animal patrons for curing and affecting the weather, with high costs for obtaining ritual knowledge. Members of the Bear Society danced like bears, killed victims, and then revived them (Skinner 1916d:693,708,713-14).

Ponca men belonging to the Women-Catchers Society had the power to touch the genitals of sleeping women and fornicate with them (Skinner 1916c:788).

Members of the Bloods' Horn Society professed to have the power to cause death if they wished, for which they were greatly feared (Mails 1973:129). Thus, it seems that there were esoteric elements in many, if not most, of these societies.

### **Conferring of the "Shaman" Title**

In general, curers who operated outside the Leaders Lodge were not considered to be shamans or real curers by lodge members (Holder 1970:50). Membership in the Iowa Secret Order of Shamans Society entailed a purchase price and elaborate initiation, with fixed officers and a code of morality (Skinner 1916d:693) which resembles a certification process rather than an experiential or skill-based shamanistic organization. Therefore, membership in secret societies resembled priestly roles even though members were often referred to as "shamans."

### **Benefits and Threats to the Community**

Shamanistic organizations claimed to provide a number of critical services for communities, not the least of which was the very survival of the community. These services included protection of warriors in battles, yearly renewal of

plant and animal life, and, in particular, good maize harvests, healing, defense, organizing war parties, and policing hunters so that herds were not prematurely dispersed (Wissler 1916a:858,861,866).

Ogalala secret societies provided a variety of community services including making medicines to protect warriors in battle, curing people, curing horses, giving food or goods to the poor, and getting people out of trouble (Wissler 1916c:18,20,38,84,88,90,95), although they also used threats and intimidation (see "Enforcement").

The most important women's society of the Mandan (the White Buffalo Cow Society) as well as the Blackfoot woman's society had the responsibility of bringing buffalo herds to the communities using a sacred white robe. Other women's societies were supposed to make the corn grow in abundance (Lowie 1916f:332,347; Wissler 1916d:432). Otherwise, the military roles of men's societies seem to have been similar to those of other groups (Lowie 1916f:294). One of the important functions of the Blackfoot secret societies was to promote military success, typically via their supernatural medicines (Wissler 1916d:366). The Kit-Fox Society was reputed to have the most powerful medicines (Wissler 1916d:399).

In the 1790s, Jean-Baptiste Trudeau (2006:168–9,204) observed several bison dances and rituals among most of the groups of the Upper Missouri River which may have been similar to the bundle-based societies of the Pawnee that were supposed to bring buffalo herds to the communities, but also had important war functions. The main bundle priest directed the buffalo hunt. The *Iruska* Society was able to control fire and cure burns (Murie 1916:555,558,608).

The Arikara men's societies were organized predominantly in order to acquire military success while the women's Goose Society promoted maize fertility and performed field blessings (Lowie 1916e:656,676–7).

Sacred war bundles were always carried by the buffalo shaman with war parties among the Iowa. He received all the spoils (Skinner 1916d:687) so that there was always a supernatural connection between war and militaristic societies or militaristic elements in secret societies, rather reminiscent of the druidic and shamanic military roles among the Celts and Anglo-Saxons. The Mystery (Animal) Society was largely centered on ritual bundles and curing or affecting weather via animal patrons (especially buffalo spirits). The Mescal Bean Society purported to provide success in war, races, and hunting, while the Pipe Society focused mainly on health, power, and prosperity (Skinner 1916d:692–3,708,719).

Omaha secret society doctors were a source of protection, weather control, magic, and curing, but also were considered a danger to the public and to be agents of illness or death (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:481,486–90; Fortune 1932:52,55).

The major secret societies of the Osage claimed to provide fertility, long life, survival from attacks, good hunting, healing, and health (Bailey 1995:30,34,53). The Hidatsa secret societies had similar claims, especially concerning war medicines (Lowie 1916f:243; Bowers 1965:282,346,451). Ponca members of the Buffalo Society were very powerful and supposedly had the ability to heal wounds (Skinner 1916c:792).

### **Exclusiveness**

There was typically a governing council of head officers (usually four individuals) who made many of the key decisions in shamanistic-type secret societies (Wissler 1916a:858). Some societies were sequentially ranked so that membership in one society was a prerequisite to membership in a higher ranked society (Wissler 1916a:871). A very small, select group of “doctors” of substantial repute and considerable means, known as the Leader Lodge (which had an animal patron), controlled all of the members and neophytes of the constituent lower lodges (Holder 1970:50). The Medicine Pipe Society only admitted prominent men who could pay for the pipe and hold the required feasts and ceremonies, which together with the costs of keeping a sacred bundle was a demanding and expensive proposition (Mails 1973:141).

The poor were never members of the Ogalala secret societies since they could not give feasts or gifts and were viewed as lacking ambition (Wissler 1916c:64).

Some of the Hidatsa societies were dominated by “high classes” (e.g., the Soldiers Society); other societies constituted a “very high rank” (e.g., the Buffalo Bull Society); and others had high positions that were unusually costly (e.g., the Dog Society) (Lowie 1916f:235,284,291).

The highest women’s society of the Mandan (White Buffalo Cow Society) was composed primarily of older women (Lowie 1916f:346). Not all women were members of societies, although most men belonged to one society or another (Lowie 1916f:294,323).

While an undetermined number of people were members of the twelve Blackfoot secret societies as a whole, it is clear that the societies were ranked in power with the highest ranking ones being more exclusive based on either combat abilities or members from wealthy “prominent families” (e.g., the Braves and the Bears Societies; Wissler 1916d:381,384–6). The tribal secret societies of the Osage were very costly to join and only a small minority of men were deemed suitable to be members. These were chosen by the existing priests (Bailey 1995:49,53).

Each Pawnee village had one to three sacred bundles which were ranked within the regional federation of villages. The highest authority was held by the priests of the four top ranked bundles, followed by the Society of Chiefs representing twelve villages. Village chiefs were custodians of the bundles, but

the bundle priests had higher authority. The Bear Society members consisted of the highest ranked shamans (Murie 1916:550–1,554,556,604).

The priests of Arikara societies “formed a close corporation having a complex and powerful organization of their own within the tribe” (Will 1928:52). Arikara women had to be “selected” to join the women’s Goose Society. There was supposedly no ranking among the Arikara men’s societies (Lowie 1916e:654,676).

For Iowa women, entry into the Tatooed Women’s Society was restricted to noble women whose families could afford the very high cost of entry (Skinner 1916d:684). The same appears to have been true of the Ponca Tatooed Women’s Society (Skinner 1916c:790). The Buffalo Tail Society of the Iowa was composed of shamans (Skinner 1916d:213).

Omaha chiefs all belonged to the local variant of the *Midewiwin* secret society, but did not belong to any of the curing/doctoring societies (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:481; Fortune 1932:51–2). The Night Dance Society was also very exclusive with high initiation costs (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:493–503).

Thus, in general, secret societies were very exclusive, with wealth being a major determinant of membership.

### Offices and Roles

Most Ogalala secret societies had a number of specialized roles, depending on the number of members. Usually, there were two to four leaders and several support offices. For example, the Kit-Fox Society with fifty members had nine special positions including war leaders, pipe bearers, and female singers (Wissler 1916c:13).

The Hidatsa Hot Dance Society had five officers (Lowie 1916f:252). A number of clearly distinct roles are portrayed in Bowers’ (1965:Figs. 2,7,10,11) diagrams of ritual lodge arrangements, including the giver of the ceremony plus his clan brothers and wives, singers, fasters, a range of impersonation roles, and a number of holy men. Although Wissler (1916d:427) did not list specific roles, offices seem to have been similar to other Plains societies, i.e., about six to eight positions, and he noted that membership prices increased with the specific rank within the societies.

In the Omaha Shell Society, special roles included a number of main positions (deer, elk, bear, buffalo, eagle) that were more or less hereditary, plus five minor positions (drummer, bowl keeper, water provider, bowl passer, and various ceremonial roles), each with a sacred bundle (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:517–18). The *Midewiwin* Society also had various levels of medicine objects and power (Fortune 1932:114). The Osage had seven degrees of priests, with the highest having all the authority and prerogatives of the other six degrees (Bailey 1995:49–50).

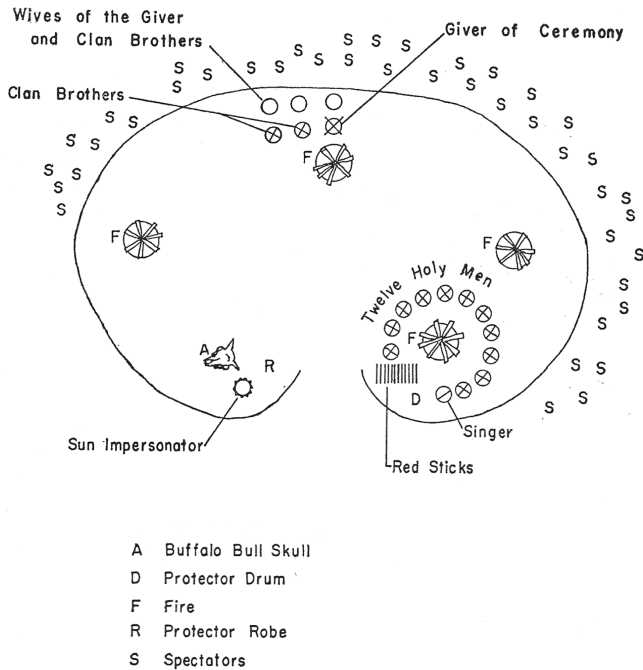
The *Helocka* Society of the Ponca had ten special positions (Skinner 1916c:784).

### Membership Fees

Both rituals and regalia had to be purchased to enter into shamanistic-type secret societies (Wissler 1916a:867). The shirt and regalia used in the Ogalala Chiefs' Society required a specialist to make and a feast to adopt them (Wissler 1916c:40). In addition, at least some members "threw away" items of great value, including their wives, as displays of their commitment to the society (Wissler 1916c:70,74). Similar proofs of devotion to the societies were exacted from candidates to top positions in West Africa where individuals were expected to sacrifice their oldest sons (see Chapter 9), perhaps not unlike demands placed on those who want to join the top ranks on the dark side in *Star Wars* or contemporary urban gangs.

Membership in Hidatsa societies generally required payment of wealth to someone in the society willing to give up their position (preferentially someone in the father's clan). Sellers tried to get high prices for their positions, usually leading initiates to borrow heavily to pay for the initiations. Payments in some societies included horses and the sexual services of the candidates' wives given to the individual sellers or even to the twelve high-ranking ("Red Stick") holy men of the Earthnaming Society (Fig. 5.2), as well as paying for twenty nights of entertainment and giving four large piles of goods and gifts to the seller and the society. Costs for initiations varied from twenty to a hundred buffalo robes plus twenty to a hundred pairs of moccasins, plus feasting food and other payments to members of the societies. In other societies, initiates paid for four nights of feasting and various gifts to sellers of positions. In addition to membership, the purchasers obtained regalia and the secrets to make war medicines, together with rights to sing certain songs (Lowie 1916f:225–230,236–7,243; Bowers 1965:352,437,451–5). Although there were no age grades, cohorts of boys about the same age could cooperate to purchase positions in a particular society (Bowers 1965:228–9,236). Members of the Dog Society were reported to have paid "heavily" for entry, and especially heavily for high positions (Bowers 1965:289).

The Mandan purchase practices were very similar to those of the Hidatsa, including the rendering of purchasers' wives for sexual services to vendors of membership positions. The wives were stripped naked before the society membership and then led outside by the vendor (Lowie 1916f:294,304,307,312). Similar practices seem to be reported in the 1790s by Trudeau (2006:168–9). Membership in women's societies was also by purchase, with high costs for acquiring songs (Trudeau 2006:324,352). Payments consisted of meat, horses, clothes, robes, blankets, regalia, pipes, and sometimes wives, together with



5.2 Diagram of the ritual structure and arrangements used for the Painted Red Stick ceremony of the Hidatsa (Bowers 1965:458). The red sticks were used by the twelve holy men as tokens to exchange for the sexual services of candidates' wives.

providing thirty days of feasting for new members in women's societies who had to supply a great deal of food and gifts (Trudeau 2006:325,332,352,349).

Purchase prices for some of the Blackfoot secret societies also involved the giving of a wife to the vendor of a position, or the giving of her sexual services (Wissler 1916d:396,413–14). Membership in societies was dependent on individual prospective initiates (rather than cohorts) paying someone in the society to sell their position (after which the seller often moved to a higher position;366). In general, the purchase prices increased with the rank of the society and with the rank within the society, with members of the Bear Society being especially noted for coming from wealthy families and paying high prices (386,427–8). In addition to wives or their sexual services, prices for the transfer of pipes included for one society (the Catchers) five to ten horses, clothes, tomahawks, and sweat baths (402).

In addition to paying for memberships in Arikara medicine lodges, men had to loan their wives to their sponsors or society leaders (Lowie 1916e:652). Similarly, men who wanted to receive instruction from shamans (possibly the same thing as entry to medicine lodges) had to induce their wives to provide “services” to the shamans (Murie 1916:640). Women who wanted to join the women's Goose Society had to pay an entry fee (Lowie 1916e:676).



Particularly noted for charging high entry fees among the Iowa were the Mystery (Animal) Society, the Pipe Society, and the Tattooed Women's Society (Skinner 1916d:684,693,708). The Mystery Society also charged high prices to obtain ritual knowledge after joining the society.

Membership in Omaha secret societies is described as "expensive," amounting to hundreds of dollars in the 1930s (Fortune 1932:36,98-100,105). The Night Dance Society had high fees for initiates, including a hundred gifts, feasting foods, a hundred knives, a hundred awls, and other items. Regalia had to be purchased separately (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:493-503,518). These materials or funds were given to all members of the society followed by an additional feast and fees that were paid directly to the novice's sponsor and instructor. Minor members had to give the society members four feasts simply to be able to attend society meals; those payments did not entitle them to learn how to cure the sick (Fortune 1932:44). In several societies, the passing of power from a member to an initiate (often father to son) theoretically left the giver destitute of power, after which he was supposed to have died as a consequence (Fortune 1932:40,47,103,108). This seems to have been used as a rationale for demanding extremely high fees for transfers of power since some individuals were able to transfer their power from various societies four or five separate times to different individuals (Fortune 1932:140), indicating that dying after selling a position was primarily ideological rhetoric.

Admittance to the three most important Osage tribal secret societies was very costly, taking up to seven years to amass enough goods to provide the feasts, gifts, sponsor fees, performers fees, paraphernalia, costume, and bundle, in addition to which candidates' wives needed to attend and "receive" other warriors (Bailey 1995:49,53,84).

### **Public Displays**

In discussing Arikara public displays, Will (1928:57-8) observed that the "principal object was to impress upon spectators the great powers of the performers: and that they vied with each other to put on ever more miraculous performances." This was undoubtedly true for all Plains groups and seems to characterize secret societies in general. These commonly involved fire handling, fire walking, or putting hands into boiling water. Initiates could also be thrown onto fires (Wissler 1916a:858-60). Such competitive public display indicates that those involved were competing for important benefits such as paying clients or prospective rich members. All the associated members of animal cults held a large yearly animal dance in the medicine lodge with "booths" for each animal lodge and masqueraded performances of the animal patrons (Wissler 1916a; Wissler 1916c).

A very small, select group of considerable means and power formed the Leader Lodge (Holder 1970:50). As a group, they displayed their supernatural powers in

exhibitionistic sorcery duels during the major Twenty-Day Ceremony (Holder 1970). Individual curers outside this group were not considered shamans.

The Ogalala society shamans demonstrated their powers at the general feasts they hosted by putting their hands in boiling water or by hitting the ground and making plants spring up, even including trees with fruit. Some members also became possessed by bear or other spirits, making them “crazy” and leading them to kill and eat dogs raw. Buffalo impersonators were also killed and brought back to life (Wissler 1916c:49,82,84,89,91). Other Siouan society members were supposed to be able to turn the sun blue. They also swallowed knives or grass which turned into a snake in their mouths. They were stabbed with 6-inch-long spear points, letting blood pour out, then were miraculously healed with no sign of any wounds. They regularly “shot” other members with round pebbles, beaver teeth, shells, or arrowheads, and then brought their victims back to life (Dorsey 1894:417–19,429). Ceremonial dances were often preceded by a procession of the dancers and society members through the community, with stops in front of all the tipis to perform dances (Wissler 1916c:32).

The Buffalo Tail Society had magical dancing dolls (Skinner 1916d:693,708,713–14) and Ponca members of the Mystery Bear Dance Society displayed their power by thrusting a cedar branch down their throat or through their skin, as well as by swallowing pipes and then regurgitating them, or by “killing” and reviving individuals (Skinner 1916c:792).

Purchasing memberships in Hidatsa societies as well as yearly buffalo calling by the Earthnaming and other societies involved public parades through the villages. Members demonstrated their supernatural powers by placing hot embers in their mouths, putting their hands in boiling water, and putting people to sleep (Lowie 1916f:248–9,252; Bowers 1965:445). It is not clear to what extent the feasts mentioned were only for members or for a wider segment of the community.

The Mandan societies put on public displays, parades, and feasts (Lowie 1916f:302).

A number of Blackfoot secret societies (e.g., Kit-Fox, Horn, and Bear Societies), perhaps all, put on public dances or ceremonies, sometimes just to get food or gifts from specific tipis (Wissler 1916d:387,399,412).

The bundle societies of the Pawnee held annual public performances as well as dances and feasts, although it is not clear how public the feasts were (Murie 1916:558–9). The Medicine Men’s Society held annual ceremonies in large ritual structures, preceded by a procession through the village. Once their secret ceremony was finished, the ritual structure was opened to the public to witness demonstrations of power that included “killing” men, having their livers eaten, and then reviving them; making corn or fruit trees grow and mature instantaneously; juggling; snake handling; standing on hot rocks;

placing hands in boiling water; and other shamanic tricks. A feast was part of the ceremony, but it is not clear if this was only for members or for the public (Murie 1916:600–3, 608, 613, 615).

Medicine bundles were similarly portrayed as the source of supernatural power for members of Omaha secret societies, making it dangerous to deal with the bundles or cross anyone possessing a bundle. Omaha doctors who owned bundles were avoided in travels because of their supernatural powers, especially if they were angry or annoyed (Fortune 1932:30–1, 71). Members of the secret doctoring societies held public parades or dances as well as dances after cures (Fortune 1932:59, 83, 86, 147). Some members of the Ghost Society and the Bear Vision Society were able to put wands down their throats (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:486; Fortune 1932:83). There were both public ceremonies, including “shootings,” and more esoteric, exclusive parts of ceremonies (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:553, 566). In some ceremonies, the leader stabbed himself in the neck, drawing copious amounts of blood, and was then miraculously healed (Fortune 1932:43). Supernatural powers were supposed to enable some members of the Ghost Society to plunge their hands into boiling kettles in order to extract joints of meat (80). After their secret sessions, the Omaha version of the *Midewiwin* and Water Monster Societies indulged in “public flaunting” of their claimed supernatural powers involving supernatural shooting duels (87–8, 92, 111). The Thunderbird Society also had public parades after the first lightning storms (147).

Given the number of people who could congregate in Arikara medicine lodges (estimated at five to six hundred people), some ceremonies were likely public displays, apparently with booths set up by different secret societies around the inside of the medicine lodge. Their miraculous demonstrations and cures included swallowing fire, arms plunged into boiling water, dancing on red hot stones, shooting men and reviving them, thrusting long knives down throats (then somersaulting, which broke off the hilt, followed by profuse bleeding and the replacement of the hilt, the removal of the knife, and a return to an uninjured state), skewering a head ear to ear, and cutting off a tongue or arm or even a head (the body continuing to dance, with blood gushing out followed by replacement of the tongue, arm or head and resumption of normal appearances). European observers were unable to tell how these tricks were accomplished (Will 1928:57–64). Victory celebrations from raids or battles were also noted, and magical performances by the women’s Goose Society were probably public as well (Lowie 1916e:650, 677). These involved maize kernels that magically materialized from people’s eyes (Lowie 1916e:656, 676–7).

### **Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

Dancing was a prominent feature in most, if not all, Plains secret societies and if prolonged was probably used to induce altered states. New initiates could be

thrown on fires in some shamanistic organizations (Wissler 1916a:859), indicating some kind of altered state (Wissler 1916a:862,864).

Some members of Ogalala societies also became possessed by bear or other spirits, making them “crazy” and leading them to kill and eat dogs raw (Wissler 1916c:89).

Novices of Omaha societies fasted for varying periods of time, from one to four days, and went without sleeping (Fortune 1932:37,105,106). Initiates of the *Midewiwin* Society also underwent a sweat lodge ritual which could induce altered states (Fortune 1932:128), and members of the Grizzly Bear Society claimed to transform themselves into bears (Fortune 1932:83), probably also in altered states.

During their initiation, members of the Kit-Fox Society could not sleep for four days – enough to produce hallucinations – and had to use scratching sticks (Wissler 1916d:402).

Trances formed part of the *Iruska* Society, known to be very powerful among the Pawnee, while members of the Deer Society consumed mescal beans and became unconscious (Murie 1916:605,635). Their dances may well have induced altered states of consciousness as well.

Mescal beans were used by the Mescal Bean Society of the Iowa to induce vomiting and cleansing for success in war and other endeavors (Skinner 1916d:714).

### **Enforcement**

In theory, the “doctors” used their curing power to benefit the village; however, in their actual behavior they resorted to threats and intimidation to bolster their position and brandished sorcery as a powerful weapon (Holder 1970:50). One of the Plains shamanistic-type secret societies (usually referred to as the *Akicita* Society) was generally given the role of governing and policing community members (Wissler 1916a:874). The Soldiers (Black Mouth) Society played the major enforcement role among the Hidatsa, although members of the Dog Society were permitted to “do whatever with whomever” they wanted, and members of the Stone Hammer Society were credited with the power to put people to sleep so that they could take what they wanted (Lowie 1916f:249,279,285).

A major role of Blackfoot secret societies was to punish offenses related to “customs.” In addition, members of the Horn Society were reputed to have the power to kill people with spells to the point that it was considered dangerous to even talk about Horn Society members (Wissler 1916d:366,416,418).

The Arikara Bears terrorized onlookers and kept them outside ceremonial lodges and in their tents (Will 1928:55).

Members of the Blood Horn Society professed to have the power to cause death if they wished, so that they were greatly feared (Mails 1973:129).

The same was true of members of Omaha doctoring secret societies, the members of which were avoided in travels lest they be angry or annoyed and their supernatural power affect any person who might meet them (Fortune 1932:31). Such doctors could use their power to settle grudges (32,50). Anyone who revealed their “tricks” was expected to die from supernatural consequences (36), probably often achieved by the power of suggestion. Non-members who attempted to doctor others were killed by sorcery in order to protect the financial interests of society members (56–7). They resented any non-member’s claim to power. Those who profaned a sacred pole or committed other offenses were punished by death from a poisoned stick (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:213,219).

There do not seem to be any reports of human sacrifices or cannibalism as part of secret society rituals on the Plains, although torture and the taking of trophy body parts was common practice among warriors (Owsley et al. 2007), and it might be expected that some of these practices would have carried over into secret societies, especially those with a warrior focus.

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

In general, shamanistic societies used animal disguises, smoking pipes, and highly decorated spoons for serving food (Wissler 1916a:860,863). The members of the Society of Chiefs wore buffalo horns and had special shields and lances (Lowie 1916d:888).

Paraphernalia for the Ogalala secret societies usually involved pipes and drums with mysterious powers, and headdresses. Costume elements and paraphernalia varied from society to society, but included fox skins (possibly with claws) and fox jaw bones for the Kit-Fox Society, with special lances and special spoons for serving at feasts; special shirts, buffalo horn headdresses, shields, and lances for the Chiefs’ Society; eagle bone whistles, owl headdresses, and deer hoof rattles for the *Miwatani* Society members; and medicine bags, pipes, and whistles for the War (Dog or Wolf) Society (Wissler 1916c:16,19,23,36,40,48,51,63,91).

Items described as used by the Omaha secret societies included exotic shells (for shooting power by the *Midewiwin* members), special stones, pipes, drums, water drums, rattles, sacred poles, maize as a ceremonial and sacred food, bowls, eagle feathers, and eagle wings (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:224,261,519,530; Fortune 1932:109,120,122). The sacred poles were about two and a half meters long with a scalp attached to one end.

The Hidatsa Dog Society used whistles made of eagle, goose, or swan bones (Lowie 1916f:285–6,309,317). The Mandan used pipes and the main women’s society made offerings to a buffalo skull (Lowie 1916f:332,350). Sacred

bundles varied in details but generally included some of the following: pelts, pipes, arrows, scalps, incense pots, rattles, seeds, bird or deer skulls, drums, whistles, feathers, wing bones, and talons (Bowers 1965:390–1,438). Large pots decorated with snakes were used as drums, and bundles with buffalo skulls were considered the most powerful (345–6,431). Arrows were also commonly used in bundle purchases (422,424–5).

The Blackfoot also used whistles in many of their societies, with individual societies adopting special apparel of potent items such as coyote skins with heads and raven skins with heads and wings. Other items used included pipes, tomahawks, horns, stick poppets used in magic, and scratching sticks used in initiations (Wissler 1916d:392,402,411,416,434).

The Siouan societies described by Dorsey (1894:373,413,418–19,426–7,455) used pipes, round pebbles, shells, eagle bone whistles, arrowheads, beaver teeth, war clubs, deer hoof rattles, and sacred poles. Osage bundles included pipes (used at all rituals), tattoo needles, scalps, rattles, war clubs and standards, sacred bows and arrows, knives, hawk skins, talons, and wing bones, rabbit feet, tally sticks (to count songs or gifts), and large brass rings (Bailey 1995:46,50,54,66,149). Masks were not used (282). Shell gorgets were worn by at least some sponsoring priests of initiates (108), perhaps similar to the use of Hopewell and Mississippian shell gorgets.

In addition to contents of sacred bundles, Pawnee secret society members often wore skins of their vision animals. Other paraphernalia used by various Pawnee societies included pipes, buffalo skulls, bustles, medicine bags (with roots for chewing to use ritually), decorated lances (for war and hunting, used like standards), loons set up on altars, mud sculptures, sage for strewing, and mescal beans (Murie 1916:559,575,604–5,607,641).

Arikara societies all used drums and rattles and many used bone whistles, buffalo skulls, animal skins with claws and skulls, birds, and smoking pipes (Will 1928:52,54–5).

Bone or wood notched rasps were used in the Ute bear dance (Lowie 1916b:826–7) which seems likely to have been performed by secret society members.

### **Secret Society Structures and Activity Locations**

The Omaha Society of the Ogalala used a special structure for their ceremonies resembling an earth lodge (Wissler 1916c:51). The Chiefs' Society and the *Akicita* Society set up a central tipi at the summer aggregation camps for the heads of their societies (Wissler 1916c:7–12; 1916a:874–5). In contrast, the Elk Cult had a tipi in the woods away from the main camp for new initiates (Wissler 1916c:88). The Horse Cult had a centrally located “shelter” for their dances (Wissler 1916c:95–6). Initiates were sent to hill tops or locations with special views for four days of fasting around a fire (Fortune 1932:37). The elk

dances of the East Dakota were similarly held in a tipi in the woods, while new initiates made solitary tents in the woods to obtain visions of the Bear Cult (Lowie 1916a:117,123).

The Omaha met in earth lodges of members but also constructed major ceremonial tents by combining two sacred tents with twelve other tents on either side, making one large tent 60–70 feet long capable of holding two to three hundred people (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:246,516). Secret rituals for magical killings took place in remote locations outside villages such as on high bluffs over rivers (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:564). Sweat baths were also used before rituals (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:575; see also Bailey 1995:62,68). The Osage initiations were held in the long house of the initiate (Bailey 1995:92), but initiation rites were also described as being held in seclusion and secrecy, and priests assembled in long houses for some rituals (Bailey 1995:62,68).

It is interesting that in historic times, large earth lodge residences of the Hidatsa appear to have replaced earlier ceremonial lodges (see Fig. 5.1) for ritual feasts (Bowers 1965:39). At least one society rented a large lodge for a bundle purchase ceremony (366). Bowers also reported stone effigies and rock circles outside villages that were associated with hunting rituals and bundle rituals (369–70).

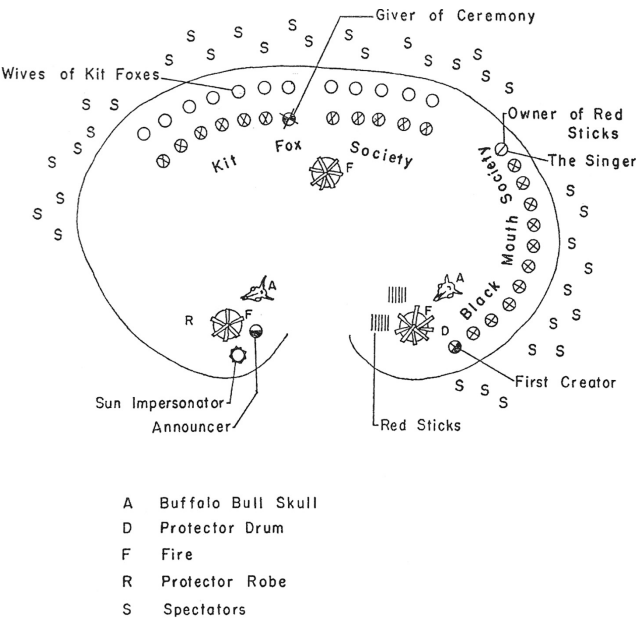
The women's White Buffalo Cow Society of the Mandan used a clearing in the woods, and engaged in sweat baths (Lowie 1916f:332,351). In the 1790s, Trudeau (2006:168–9) also observed a special ritual structure outside the village area of the Mandans and Gros Ventres. This consisted of a skin-covered tent erected for a ceremony to attract bison that appears similar to secret society rituals recorded more than a century later (Figs. 5.2 and 5.3).

Blackfoot secret societies often seem to have had tipis reserved for their use (possibly shared by several societies), set up in the center of villages that were composed of aggregated bands for buffalo hunting (Wissler 1916d:367,387,425).

The Pawnee federation of thirteen villages gathered together inside an earthen ring about 20 meters in diameter with a mound in front of an altar, and four poles representing the four directions and four seasons. This gathering featured meetings of the Chiefs' Society (and probably other secret societies) and the display or use of sacred bundles from each village (Murie 1916:550–4). The only other ritual structures mentioned were two relatively large earthen lodges used by the Medicine Men's Society for secret and public ceremonies on two occasions in the year. Mud sculptures of mythical animals, mud women, and people of rawhide were created inside one of the structures, but were destroyed every year. Booths within the structures were set up by individual shamanic groups to display their powers (Murie 1916:600–3, 606–7).

An Arikara medicine lodge seen in 1811 was like a "temple" and was large enough to house five to six hundred people (Lowie 1916e:650). A century later, Will (1928:51,53) described Arikara medicine lodges used for all ceremonies by





5.3 The arrangement of people and paraphernalia for a subsequent phase of the Hidatsa Painted Red Stick ceremony (Bowers 1965:259).

groups of medicine men as 90 feet in diameter, located at the side of an open plaza in the center of villages. These ceremonial lodges had clay platforms 6–8 inches high and 6–7 feet square. They were used as altars similar to those of the Winnebago (Dorsey 1894:427).

The dance enclosures used for the Ute bear dance were 70–90 feet in diameter with brush walls and a central hole used as a drum resonator (Lowie 1916b:826–7).

Trudeau (2006:198,204) noted that the place used for dancing by groups along the Upper Missouri River was in the center of their villages.

**Caves**

At least in one case, an initiation into the Omaha Buffalo Society involved a vision with a supernatural snake in a cave. There was also a mound described in the form of a buffalo inside the cave (Fortune 1932:64).

**Burials**

The sources reviewed provided no information on any special burial treatment of secret society members. Fletcher and La Flesche (1911:554) stated that society members were buried in normal fashions without regalia.

**Cross-cutting of Kinship Groups**

Inheritance of roles or membership probably ensured that key families were always represented, thereby ensuring that memberships of secret societies

cross-cut key kinship groups. The entry into Hidatsa societies was by purchase, preferentially from someone from the father's clan (Lowie 1916f:226).

The leaders or priests of the Pawnee bundle societies were ideally hereditary positions within kin groups (Murie 1916:554,558). Memberships in the major secret societies of the Osage cross-cut clans and moieties (Bailey 1995:53).

Membership in the women's Goose Society of the Arikara was supposed to be inherited from mothers, although there was a selection process and members had to pay for entry (Lowie 1916e:676).

Membership, especially of leaders, in Omaha secret societies was largely hereditary, and aristocratic, according to Fortune (1932:1,6,100,111,147,151,158).

### **Regional Organization**

The *Akicita* Society was only formally constituted when various tribes or subtribes gathered together for communal hunts or the summer aggregation villages, which implies a regional ritual organization. Members consisted of high-ranking people from the constituent tribes, and the society had its own central tipi, dances, and ceremonies (Wissler 1916a:874–5).

Lowie (1916f:352) included both Mandan and Hidatsa as members of the White Buffalo Cow Society and Goose Society, which implies a multi-ethnic and regional organization. Bowers (1965:323–5,340–1) specifically stated that all villages, including some Mandan villages, had representatives in the Holy Women's Society and that the Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies Society had bundles in all the villages.

Members of the Omaha and Winnebago *Midewiwin* Societies attended each other's ceremonies, implying a multi-ethnic and regional organization of this secret society (Fortune 1932:127).

Blackfoot secret societies held ceremonies once a year during the aggregation village phase for buffalo hunting (Wissler 1916d:425), implying that members generally came from a large geographical region.

Thirteen Pawnee villages formed a federation that met periodically, in which sacred bundles were ranked in power and importance (Murie 1916:550–1,554,556). Members of at least the Chiefs' Society were drawn from all of these villages, indicating a regional organization, and the same was likely true of the other Pawnee secret societies as well.

### **Power Animals and Regional Art Motifs**

Due to the regional and highly interactive network of Plains secret societies (see "Motives and Dynamics"), certain animals and art motifs acquired widespread prominence in secret society rituals and depictions. The buffalo and bear feature prominently as supernatural patrons in many groups. There is a Grizzly Bear Society among the Omaha as well as societies with patrons in the form of rattlesnakes, buffaloes, ghosts, and a mythical horned water monster with a long tail (Fortune 1932:25–8,92). A mythical horned water

monster also featured as a power animal elsewhere on the Plains (Dorsey 1894:438,440).

Magical powers were associated with horns (of buffalo) and feared by the Blackfoot (Wissler 1916d:411,432). Buffalo skulls were placed on the altar of the Buffalo Society, and magical powers were attributed to sacred bundles with buffalo skulls among the Hidatsa (Murie 1916:550,555,575,604).

Dog meat had a high ceremonial value for the Dakota and Ogalala, and the head was given to important men (Wissler 1916c:89; 1916a:862, 864). The Arikara societies used dog meat in their victory feasts (Lowie 1916e:650). The Omaha ate white dogs before ceremonies (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:575).

### Number of Societies

There was pronounced rivalry between some societies in games and war, including attempts at wife-stealing from members of other societies (Lowie 1916d:887), indicating that there were multiple societies throughout the Plains.

Wissler (1916c:74) documented such rivalry among the Ogalala secret societies involving gambling, racing, hunting, war, boasting, giving away wealth in public (somewhat reminiscent of potlatching), and wife-stealing. Wissler described about twelve secret societies for the Ogalala and stated that it was possible to have membership in multiple societies (Wissler 1916c:66).

Lowie (1916f) did not give a specific number of societies for the Hidatsa or Mandan, but did say that the societies formed a graded set, and that membership in multiple societies was possible. He listed at least six societies for the Hidatsa, including the Soldiers or Black Mouth (for high classes), the Stone Hammer, Kit-Fox, Dog, Buffalo Bulls (of high rank), and Hot Dance Societies. Bowers (1965:323–5,338–41,366,397,437) referred to the Big Bird Society, Wolf Society, Earthnaming (Buffalo) Society, and three women's societies. The Arikara had eight distinct sacred societies (Ghost, Deer, Buffalo, Bear, Crane or Eagle, Duck, Owl, Rabbit) which were “united in one body” (Will 1928:53). Wissler (1916d:366) lists twelve secret societies for the Peigan Blackfoot. There were three powerful tribal societies for the Osage (Bailey 1995:21,45,53,222).

Murie (1916:556,558,580,587,600,604–5,608) mentioned various bundle societies (two dealing mainly with hunting and six focused on war), including the Chiefs', Medicine Men's, Bear, Buffalo, *Iruska*, Young Dog, Tied Penis, and Deer Societies. It was possible to belong to multiple societies. Smaller, more ephemeral, imitator societies sometimes were begun by ambitious men as well (Murie 1916:579).

The Iowa had a number of societies grading from purely militaristic ones to those focused primarily on supernatural powers. Secret societies probably included the Mystery (Animal) Society, the Secret Order of Shamans, the Pipe Society, the Buffalo Tail Society, the Mescal Bean Society, and possibly the Tattooed Women's Society (Skinner 1916d:684,292–3,708,713–14,719).

Skinner (1916c) mentioned five societies for the Ponca, but it is not clear that all of these were secret societies.

At least six main secret societies were described for the Omaha by Fortune (1932:25–8), including the Grizzly Bear, Rattlesnake, Ghost, Buffalo, Water Monster, and *Midewiwin* Societies. Mails (1973:275–82) listed nine secret societies among the Omaha, including the Bear, Horse, Wolf, Ghost, Storm, Honorary Chiefs, Hundred Gifts, Shell, and Pebble Societies.

### **Proportion of Population and Numbers of Members**

The Ogalala Kit-Fox Society had fifty members, the Chiefs' Society had thirty to forty, the Omaha Society fifty to sixty, whereas most "cults" had only three to four members (Wissler 1916c:13,38,51,88). It is not clear what populations these members were drawn from, but the *Akicita* Society only met when the constituent tribes or subtribes aggregated for large-scale hunts (Wissler 1916a:874), probably involving hundreds of people if not more. This may have been typical for the other societies as well.

The Kit-Fox Society of the Hidatsa had about thirty members (Lowie 1916f:257). As noted in the introduction to this chapter, many boys did not even join the age-grade societies (see Bowers 1965:136,211).

Almost all men were supposed to belong to one society or another among the Mandan. Those who did not were derogatorily referred to as "finger-in-the-eye" men. In contrast, not all women belonged to a secret society, although the most important women's society had about fifty members including five male singers (Lowie 1916f:294,323,349). The important Holy Woman's Society of the Hidatsa limited membership to twenty from several different villages (Bowers 1965:323–5). The very powerful Earthnaming (Buffalo) Society had twelve holy men who perhaps constituted only the highest rank (Bowers 1965:455). It should be emphasized again that many lesser societies were formed by ambitious men (see "Motives and Dynamics"), and that in other culture areas secret societies were formed for protection against the depredations of members of the more powerful secret societies, thus creating large overall memberships of such societies (see Chapter 9). The same may have been true on the Plains, although this was not specifically mentioned.

The Braves Society of the Blackfoot was the top-ranked society and had from forty to fifty members, while the Bears Society had about twenty (Wissler 1916d:381,386).

Ideally, there were only twenty-two members in the Omaha *Midewiwin* Society (Fortune 1932:116–17), and memberships in secret societies were described as "severely restricted" with fixed numbers of members and assigned seats in the lodge (127,151). While there were multiple societies (at least six main ones), memberships often overlapped (102).

The Ponca *Helocka* Society had thirty-two members (Skinner 1916c:784) and the Osage priests constituted “a small minority of men” (Bailey 1995:49).

Unfortunately, authors did not provide estimates of the overall population size from which members were drawn. However, in 1795, Trudeau (2006:90,95,100,121–2,127) observed groups of Plains Indians (Chaguienne, Arikara, Sioux, and Gros Ventre) each with 140–260 households that were reported to have been capable in aggregate of assembling 500–4,000 warriors. If these represent the ballpark populations from which membership in various societies was drawn, it can be appreciated that membership in each society was highly selective.

### Sex

In general, women did not have roles in Ogalala secret societies except as singers, although Wissler (1916c:63,70,92–8) also reported that there was a Woman’s Medicine Cult and a magically powerful Double-Women’s Cult. Women’s societies were also documented among the Hidatsa; however, women always had lower status than male bundle owners, and the purchase price for men’s membership in secret societies often included their wives’ sexual services (Lowie 1916f:228–30; Bowers 1965:323–5,338–47,455). Women could also be singers in some societies, and they prepared food for feasts (Lowie 1916f:291). Women’s societies among the Mandan appear to have been more important and elaborate despite the same use of wives’ sexual services as payment for men’s initiations (Lowie 1916f:304,307,323–50). Just as women often served as singers in men’s societies, men often served as singers in women’s societies (Lowie 1916f:349).

The women’s Goose Society among the Arikara and Hidatsa was for maize fertility. It involved both magical performances and matrilineal hereditary memberships which had to be paid for. Men acted as singers in women’s societies, while women (specifically the wives of the society leaders) acted as singers in the men’s societies (Lowie 1916e:659,676–7). Memberships in men’s societies entailed the loan of candidates’ wives to either their sponsor or the society leader. Women also danced in society victory celebrations (Lowie 1916e:650,652).

Wives of at least some Blackfoot secret society members were also considered to be members of the society, although their roles were not specified, and the giving of wives to vendors of society positions was a notable feature (Wissler 1916d:387,396,413–14). Mails (1973:88) considered wives of society members among the Blackfoot as having the status of “lay members” of the societies. Blackfoot women also had their own secret society to attract buffaloes (Wissler 1916d:432).

In contrast, women were strictly excluded from Pawnee secret society membership and ceremonies, except those held within the earthen ring gathering

of the village federation, which were considered to be public events (Murie 1916:556). Women did participate in the public dances, but were “disciplined” for challenging leaders (Murie 1916:568,570,635). Only males were initiated among the Osage, although their wives could be honorary members (Bailey 1995:79).

The Iowa had a Tattooed Women’s Society which was very costly to join and largely restricted to noble women (Skinner 1916d:684); however, it is not clear whether this was a secret society. The Ponca had a similar society (Skinner 1916c:790).

At least two out of nine secret societies among the Omaha allowed women to be members, the Ghost and the Storm Societies (Mails 1973:278–9), although Fortune (1932:82,123,140) reported that formerly women were also members of the Grizzly Bear and Rattlesnake Societies as well as engaging in supernatural duels in the Water Monster Society. Girls were tattooed as part of initiation rituals for the exclusive Night Dance Society, and they seem to have been dedicated to cooking for the society and dancing in its ceremonies (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:503,507).

Both males and females danced at the Ute bear dance (Lowie 1916b:826–7), which may have been organized by a secret society.

### Age of Initiates

In general, there seems to have been a loose age grading of many secret societies on the Plains. For example, the Kit-Fox Society admitted boys under fifteen years old, while other societies were for older men (Lowie 1916d:888). Ogalala societies varied in the age at which members were initiated. *Miwitani* Society memberships began around ten years old, whereas the Chiefs’ Society members were all over thirty years old. The youngest initiate mentioned in any society was seven years old (Wissler 1916c:18,38,42,65).

Hidatsa boys began to be initiated into societies at about seven years old, progressing to their next society at about fifteen years old, and entering the Dog Society if possible in midlife, around forty-five years old (Lowie 1916f:234,237,243,284). The general age of Buffalo Bulls members was about thirty, although at least one junior member was eight years old (Lowie 1916f:291). Individuals stayed members for life unless they sold their positions to others (Lowie 1916f:234).

Mandan boys began entering societies at about ten to fifteen years old, while at least a few two-year-old girls were able to become members of the highest ranked women’s society, and girls of eight years old were mentioned in the White Buffalo Cow Society (Lowie 1916f:306,328,349).

“Small boys” performed dances in the Pawnee Bear Society, and boys could become members of bundle societies “at any age” and remained members for life (Murie 1916:558,604). Skinner (1916d:708) reported that “children” were participants in the Iowa Pipe Society.

At around seven or eight years old, Omaha boys were sent to hill tops or special locations for fasting and visions (Fortune 1932:37).

### Feasts

Many of the Ogalala secret societies featured feasts as part of their ceremonial dances and initiations, or acquisition of regalia, or as payment for services, e.g., Kit-Fox, Chiefs, Elks, Double-Women, and Bear Societies (Wissler 1916c:16,37,40,87,89,92-4). Virtually all the meetings of the secret societies involved feasts (66) and at least some feasts were also for the general public, such as the *Heyoka* general feast that featured dog meat (82).

Kit-Fox Society members among the Hidatsa offered food to the spirits at feasts, and women prepared food for feasts; however, there is no indication of who the participants were (Lowie 1916f:255,291).

Feasting was mentioned as a general characteristic of public displays and parades of Mandan societies, and also in connection with women's societies among the Mandan, giving the impression that these were primarily for members; however, Lowie (1916f:302,324,332,349,351) did not provide explicit details.

Feasting (possibly public) was part of the dancing and yearly renewal of lances used in Pawnee bundle societies as well as for the annual Medicine Men's ceremonies and displays of supernatural powers (Murie 1916:559,601). It would be surprising if feasting was not a feature of the gathering of the sacred bundles from the thirteen Pawnee villages as well.

Military victories of the Arikara were accompanied by feasts featuring dog meat, and feasts were also given by field owners to the women's Goose Society members who blessed their crops (Lowie 1916e:650,677).

Vague references to feasts among the Iowa societies were only made for the Mystery (Animal) Society and the Buffalo Tail Society (Skinner 1916d:692,713).

Among the Ponca, feasts were mentioned in connection with the *Helochka* Society and the Tattooed Women's Society, but no details were provided (Skinner 1916c:784,790).

Feasts were required at all Omaha secret society meetings (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:565) and Omaha initiates into the *Midewiwin* Society provided a feast for the society after their induction (Fortune 1932:105).

There was a feast following an eighteen-hour fast at the conclusion of the Ute bear dance ceremony (Lowie 1916b:826-7).

### Frequency of Events

Shamanistic societies typically held yearly renewal ceremonies, presumably for their bundles and surrounding life (Wissler 1916a:858).

The Mandan women's White Buffalo Cow Society held ceremonies once a year lasting for a month (Lowie 1916f:349). Similarly, the Blackfoot Women's



Buffalo Society held ceremonies once a year, and it appears that most of the Blackfoot secret societies met once a year during the aggregation period for buffalo hunting (Wissler 1916d:425,432). The Hidatsa women's Goose Society held several meetings in the spring (Bowers 1965:346).

The Pawnee Medicine Men's Society held a Twenty-Day ceremony once a year in two large earthen lodges. They also held smudging purification ceremonies twice a year (Murie 1916:600). The gathering of the sacred bundles of the thirteen federated Pawnee villages presumably took place yearly or less frequently; however, this is not explicit (Murie 1916:551).

The Omaha Shell Society held four main meetings each year (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:519).

The Ute bear dance was an annual religious dance (Lowie 1916b:823) that may have been performed by secret society members.

## CHAPTER SIX

# THE EASTERN WOODLANDS AND OTHERS

THE *MIDEWIWIN* “SOCIETY OF SHAMANS,” AKA THE  
“GRAND MEDICINE SOCIETY”

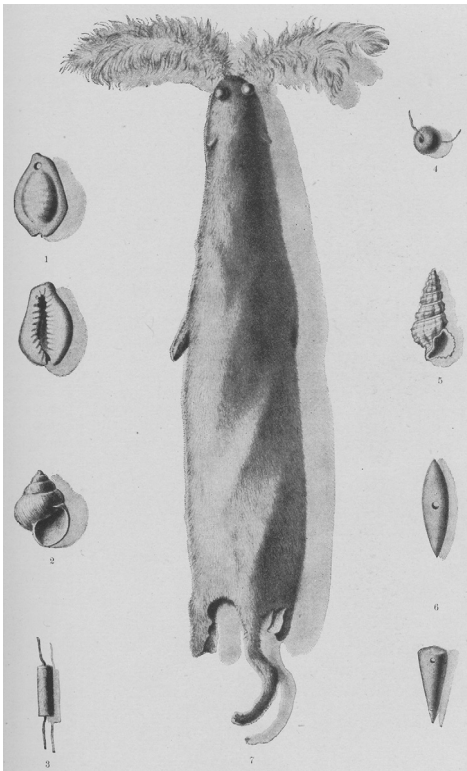
### *Introduction*

Around the Great Lakes, particularly among the Ojibway (Fig. 4.1), the *Midewiwin* Society was the dominant, and, in many cases, the only, secret society. It was very powerful and drew participants from a wide area. As noted in Chapter 5, the *Midewiwin* Society also featured prominently in some Plains groups. A major feature was the “shooting” of initiates or other individuals with a magical cowrie shell or other unusual object (Figs. 6.1 and 6.2). The victims fell down “dead” from the power thrown at them, only to be revived again with new power. It is interesting that this identical drama was used in the Bella Coola secret societies where quartz crystals were used to shoot initiates who feigned death and were then resurrected (McIlwraith 1948b:34–6,247–8,252). This illustrates the ease with which effective and popular secret society ritual elements could diffuse across large distances.

Because of the relative brevity of this chapter, no overview summary of the sections will be provided. Thus, I will proceed directly to the basic ethnographic observations.



6.1 Ojibway *Midewiwin* members “shooting” an initiate with power using an otter skin bag and sea shells (Hoffman 1891:192).



6.2 Sacred objects used by members of the Ojibway *Midewiwin* Society including sea shells and an otter bag used for “shooting” power into members (Hoffman 1891:Plate 11).

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

The purpose of the *Midewiwin* Society, and presumably the *Metawit* Society of the Menomini Indians which closely resembled it, was “to give a certain class of ambitious men and women sufficient influence through their acknowledged power of exorcism and necromancy to lead a comfortable life at the expense of the credulous” (Hoffman 1891:151). The “influence wielded by *mide* [shamanic members of the society, especially those of high rank] generally, and particularly such as have received four degrees, is beyond belief” (274). Their influence approached deity status, or involved direct communication with the dieties. However, it is also revealing that society members were concerned to curry influence and acquire friends to help defend themselves against their numerous enemies – mainly uninitiated community members (218). This indicates that those aggrandizers seeking power were calculating risks of exercising power against the risk of creating popular resentments and antagonisms that could undermine their efforts. It is also revealing that initiates were taught that they needed great strength to resist doing evil, including the harming of kinsmen (176). The implication is that many initiates did not resist these temptations, and were, in fact, classic aggrandizers or even sociopaths. Hoffman (1896:68) stated that the *Midewiwin* Society constituted a general pattern for all western Algonquian speakers.

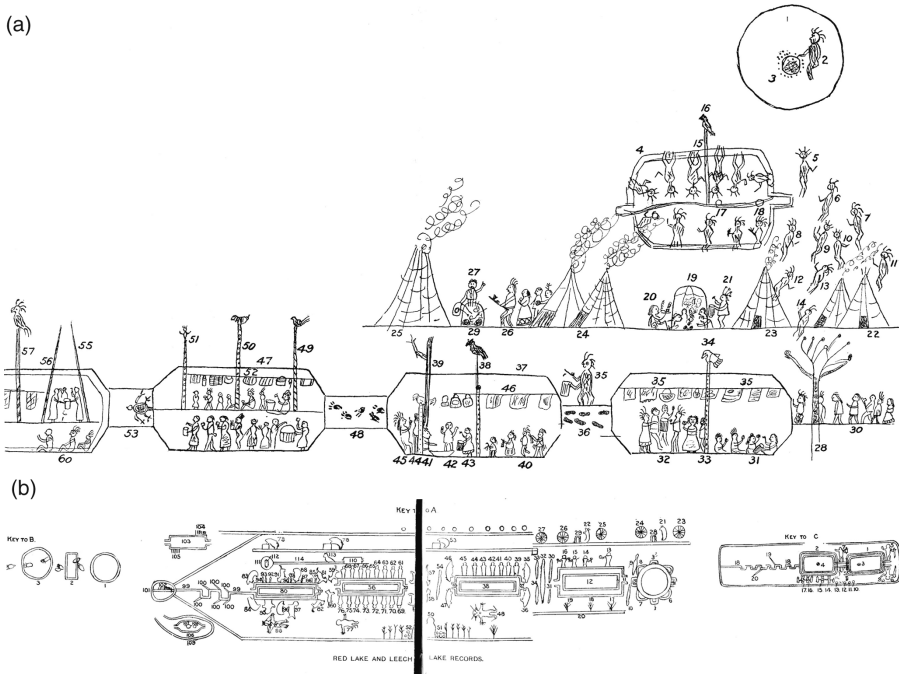
#### **Wealth Acquisition**

In addition to the substantial gifts and fees that new initiates of every grade were required to pay to members in general, and to the officiating priests and mentors in particular, *mide* (shamanic members) were paid large sums to kill or cause misfortune to people with their poisons or powers, as well as for helping in more prosaic endeavors such as hunting, love, sickness, and warfare. Love potion recipes, in particular, fetched very high prices (Hoffman 1891:227,257–8). Since initiates of all grades were the only people supposedly capable of expelling spirits that caused illnesses, they were probably paid for these services as well, and certainly those taken to the medicine lodge for curing paid high fees (Hoffman 1891:191,281).

Members of the *Mitawit* Society openly extolled the virtues of the remedies that they owned together with their associated spirits, and solicited buyers for them (Hoffman 1896:94).

#### **Political Connections**

Hoffman provides no explicit information on the relation of *Midewiwin* members to political power.



6.3 Examples of Ojibway pictographs on bark scrolls recording *Midewiwin* secret society rituals (Hoffman 1891:Plates 3 and 8).

## Tactics

### *Ideology and Esoteric Knowledge*

*Midewiwin* members “are firmly believed to possess the power of community with various supernatural beings – manidos – and in order that certain desires may be realized they are sought after and consulted” (Hoffman 1891:151). The fourth (the highest) degree *mide* (shamanic members) were the supreme magicians and supposedly knew the thoughts of others (Hoffman 1891:169). Among the Menomini, the *Mitawit* members were all considered to be medicine men or women. They were distinct from other categories of spiritual practitioners who operated as individuals (Hoffman 1896:110).

In addition to communication with spirits, the *mide* possessed pictographic bark records of songs and ceremonies (see Fig. 6.3), some of the specifics of which were only interpretable by the scribe, while some other elements appeared to be more widely intelligible (Hoffman 1891:164,287–8). Many of the words in songs were also archaic (Hoffman 1891:227,244,248,259,260,263) and probably only intelligible to the initiated.

### *Benefits and Threats to Communities*

Only the *mide* could expel demons and destroy enemies by supernatural means (Hoffman 1891:157,168–9). Higher grade members could cure

people (Hoffman 1891:254). Among the Ojibwa, the society claimed that it could protect people against hunger and disease, whereas among the Central Algonquians the society focused primarily on ensuring the safe return of war parties, as on the Great Plains (Cook 2012:503).

The powers of Menomini *mita* (*mide*) included the curing of diseases, providing success in hunting and in attracting women or success in other endeavors, and power over enemies (Hoffman 1896:114).

### *Exclusive Membership, Roles, Fees, and Hierarchies*

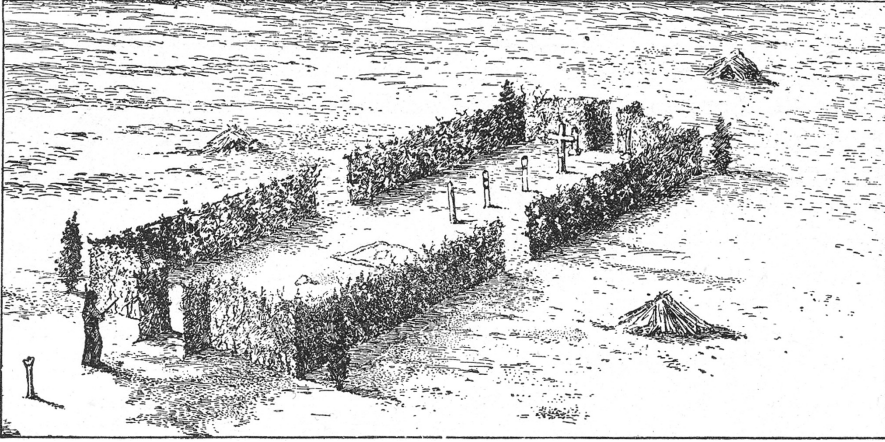
In the *Mitawit* Society, there were four principal chiefs, four secondary chiefs, and four tertiary chiefs, all with specific ritual roles. They were assisted by two aides and a number of couriers. Wives of the chiefs erected the ritual structure and prepared food (Hoffman 1896:70).

*Midewiwin* initiations involved large fees, including presents made to the general members of the society over the period of instruction which could last for a number of years, plus fees paid to personal instructors as well as to eight officiating priests. A variety of feasts had to be given, including a feast after initiation. The greater the value of gifts, the more rapidly candidates progressed. Owing to the high costs, candidates often borrowed to get enough to pay the fees and became impoverished or hopelessly in debt. Initiation into the second grade cost twice as much as initiation into the first grade, and even the first grade was prohibitive for many. The fourth grade initiation cost four times the amount required for the first grade initiation (Hoffman 1891:162–4, 189, 221, 224–5, 256–7, 274; 1896:67). Gifts and fees generally took the form of robes, blankets, kettles, furs, tobacco, horses, or other property (Hoffman 1891:182, 224). Initiation fees for the *Mitawit* Society ranged between \$200 and \$300 (Hoffman 1896:110), a considerable sum in the late nineteenth century. These high costs ensured that membership and the attainment of high ranks was very exclusive, restricted to only the wealthiest individuals.

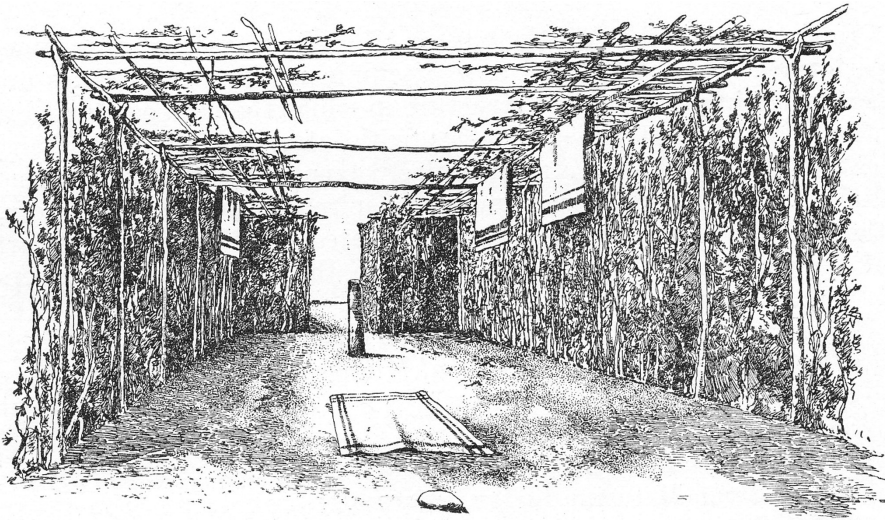
### *Public Displays of Power and Wealth*

*Midewiwin* ceremonies were held in a separate structure (Figs. 6.4 and 6.5), sometimes shaded and sometimes open, but the activities were clearly visible through openings in the structure to anyone in the “usual crowd of spectators” or to the “numerous visitors,” although the general public would not understand the rituals (Hoffman 1891:187, 189, 206, 231, 243; 1896:84). Many people were camped around the *Midewiwin* structure and could easily witness the processions that took place from the sweat house (100 meters away) to the medicine lodge. Displays of putative supernatural power included the ability of *mide* to make figurines or sacred bags or other objects move by themselves; making snakes appear from empty bags; making bear claws hang from mirror surfaces





6.4 An elevated view of an Ojibway *Midewiwin* secret society ritual structure (Hoffman 1891:256, Fig. 34).



6.5 A detailed view of the interior of an Ojibway *Midewiwin* ritual structure (Hoffman 1891:Fig. 11).

held upside down; turning dry snake skins into live snakes and back into dry skins; mastery of fire; “shooting” candidates or other members with supernatural energy in the form of shells or other objects so that those who were shot fell over as if dead and were then revived; the expulsion of malevolent spirits from the medicine lodge (in mime); and telling numerous accounts of their own supernatural abilities (Hoffman 1891:169, 204–6, 215, 220, 235, 240, 261, 275; 1896:97, 101–2, 105). Once candidates had been “shot” with power and revived, they began to dance and shoot other members who acted similarly and participated in the dance (Hoffman 1896:102).



### *Sacred Ecstatic Experiences, Human Sacrifice, and Cannibalism*

All boys, but especially *Midewiwin* initiates, fasted in the woods to obtain helping spirits (Hoffman 1891:163). Initiations also involved a number of sweat baths that usually produced altered states of consciousness (Hoffman 1891:177,181,204; 1896:104,117). Among the Menomini, descriptions of candidates who had been “shot” with supernatural power resembled ecstatic states (Hoffman 1896:101). The rituals in which members imagined themselves transformed into various animals probably also involved sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs).

There was no indication of human sacrifice or cannibalism in the literature that I consulted.

### *Enforcement*

The *Midewiwin* members, especially in the higher ranks of the society, said that they could destroy their enemies while transformed into a bear, and the highest ranks claimed that they could capture souls (Hoffman 1891:168,170,236). *Mide* could also use poisons to kill people and the highest ranking *mide* were dreaded owing to their power to injure or cause misfortune to others via their “unlimited powers in magic” (Hoffman 1891:227,236,275).

## **Material Aspects**

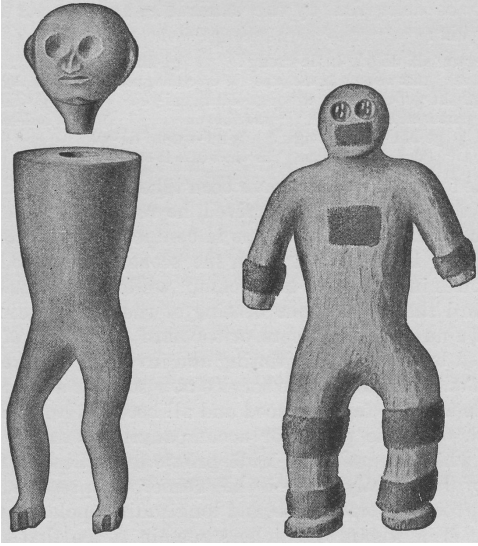
### *Paraphernalia*

Small sea shells (especially cowries) or simple antler carvings were used to demonstrate the insertion of spiritual forces into the bodies of *mide* (Hoffman 1891:167,215,220,240, Plate xi). Medicine bags were made of the skins of otters or similar animals (see Fig. 6.2), the otter being the most common emblem of the society (Hoffman 1891:184,220). Four or more bird bone sucking tubes (4–5 inches long) were used for curing (157,254). Pictographic images were drawn on birch bark slabs to record songs, ceremonies, and animals from vision quests (161,163,193) (see Fig. 6.3). Small wooden figurines (Fig. 6.6) were made by boys on vision quests and used by *mide* (163,204). Stuffed owls were set up on the sacred posts inside the medicine lodge (175–7,256), and the pipe or calumet is described as being “more respected than the scepters of kings” (153).

The same materials were used by the *Mitawit* Society, as well as a drum filled partly with water, a ceremonial baton (*c.* 30 inches long) with attached shavings, gourd rattles, ochre, and various amulets (Hoffman 1896:73,75). Hoffman also mentioned that members dressed elaborately for the ceremonies, including beaded bags or belts, belts with brass tacks, shell bracelets, and pelts of various animals.

### *Structures and Activity Locations*

The *Midewiwin* ceremonial lodge was about 60–80 feet long and 20 feet wide (see Figs. 6.4 and 6.5). Its sides were made of saplings 2 or 3 inches in diameter,



6.6 Wooden figurines used by officials in Ojibway *Midewiwin* secret societies (Hoffman 1891:205).

mostly covered by bark or brush, although the top was largely open or covered with branches, presumably for shade (Hoffman 1891:187,256; 1896:71). The structure had two openings at the long ends – a not uncommon feature of ritual structures in several areas of North America – so that it was relatively easy to see inside. The structure had from two to four sacred posts (about 5–7 feet tall and 6–8 inches in diameter) which were set up along the long axis together with a stone (*c.* 12 inches in diameter) at the base of one post marking the footprint of a bear. *Mitawit* structures had cedar boughs and mats along the inside walls (Hoffman 1896:71). Their structures could be near (about 200 yards away from) the grave of a deceased member, and in one case a *Mitawit* structure was located about two miles from the nearest village (Hoffman 1896:71–2,125). New structures appear to have been erected every year, apparently in different locations. Expediently made lodges or tents were set up in the vicinity of the main ritual structure for participants and observers (Hoffman 1896:71,93). An arrangement of tents was also reported by Dorsey (1894:427) for the Winnebago Sioux for sacred dances which included “shooting” participants with various objects (e.g., beaver teeth, marine shells, arrowheads) from an otter skin bag. The dance tent was 20 feet wide and 50–100 feet long, with an earthen mound 4 inches high and 18 inches on a side where buffalo head gear was placed.

A domed sweat lodge about 10 feet in diameter was built about 100 yards away from the main *Midewiwin* ritual structure and was used by candidates and initiates (Hoffman 1891:189; 1896:104,117).

Members in the two highest degrees (*Jessakkids*) built small, tall, walled structures that they used for communicating with spirits, probably similar to Algonkian “shaking tents,” although it is not clear where these were located



6.7 Tents used by high-ranking Ojibway members of the *Midewiwin* society (Hoffman 1891:252) indicating spiritual connections emanating from the top of the tent to the cosmos. Similar tent representations in Upper Paleolithic caves in France may have been meant to represent spirit emanations or connections (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011).

(Hoffman 1891:158,252, figs. on 252; see also Hoffman 1896:145–8). These have been portrayed with spirit connections emanating from the tops of the structures (Fig. 6.7), not unlike some of the tent representations in Upper Paleolithic caves in France (Chapter 10).

The instruction of candidates took place “in the woods” where vision quests were also held.

### *Burials*

Hoffman (1896:71) seemed to imply that important members of the *Mitawit* Society had special burial locations; however, this is not explicit. As noted above, the burial of a deceased member could be near (about 200 yards away from) *Midewiwin* structures, although one example was located about two miles from the nearest village (Hoffman 1896:71–2,125).

### *Cross-cutting Kinship*

*Mide* were not hereditary (Hoffman 1891:160), but presumably members represented a range of different kinship groups.

### *Regional Organization*

Hoffman (1891:158) stated that for the entire Menomini tribe (about 1,500 people), there were only five individuals who had achieved the third or fourth grade (*Jessakkid*) in the *Midewiwin* Society. This implies that these individuals served a fairly large region and population base.

Meetings of the *Mitawit* Society drew members from a 50-mile radius or more, and members at the meeting often saw each other only at *Mitawit*

meetings, implying that they came from significant distances and that the society represented a regional organization (Hoffman 1896:91,111).

### *Power Animals*

The main symbol of the *Midewiwin* Society was the otter, although the tortoise and bear were also sacred, and an owl was affixed to their sacred posts which served as an *axis mundi* (Hoffman 1891:175–7,184,187). Bears were the tutelary spirits for members in the third degree (*Jessakkids*; Hoffman 1891:240). Large cobbles at the base of posts represented bear prints. The cross (a North American cosmic cross rather than a Christian cross) was the symbol of the fourth degree (155). Animals and birds were the most desirable spirit visions and helpers (163). Malevolent spirits trying to prevent candidates from entering the medicine lodge or from being initiated took the form of panthers and bears (169,231,261). Imaginary types of animals also featured in the pantheon.

### *Number of Societies*

In my sources, no mention was made of any secret society organizations around the Great Lakes other than the *Midewiwin* and its cognates. However, it would not be surprising if there were minor variants that co-existed, especially given the proliferation of secret societies on the adjacent Plains.

### *Proportion of Population and Numbers of Members*

At one Menomini gathering, there were 1,500 people attending, possibly representing the regional population, of which about 100 belonged to the *Midewiwin* Society (hence about 7 percent of those present), of which only five people had achieved the third or fourth degrees (Hoffman 1891:158). Elsewhere, Hoffman (1896:84,125) reported *Mitawit* Society meetings with 106 members (62 men and 44 women), or in another instance with 60 members attending. It is clear that these members were drawn from a large region about 100 miles in diameter (Hoffman 1896:111); however, there is no mention of the size of population in the region.

### *Sex*

Either men or women could enter the *Midewiwin* and *Mitawit* societies and hold positions in any of the four degrees. However, it seems that the main role of female initiates was to sing and to prepare food for feasts and to erect the ritual structures (Hoffman 1891:164,224,274; 1896:67–70,84,125).

### *Age of Initiates*

Initiation into the first degree of the *Midewiwin* Society took place at about ten years old for boys (Hoffman 1891:163,172). Initiations into higher grades

always entailed waiting for a minimum of one year, and instruction usually was a matter of several years.

Some initiates in the *Mitawit* Society were young boys and girls. Hoffman (1896:68,125,137) cites examples of girls of four and eight years old being initiated.

### *Feasting*

Each initiate in the *Midewiwin* and *Mitawit* Societies had to hold a major feast at their expense after initiation, as well as smaller feasts prior to initiation for their mentors and the main priests (Hoffman 1891:164,218,225,235,274; 1896:111). There were also dog sacrifices for every initiation with an additional dog added at each higher grade of initiation. Dogs were prepared for feasting with the head reserved for the highest ranking members (Cook 2012:503–4).

Hoffman (1896:73) also mentioned a feast held at a member's grave near a *Midewiwin* ritual structure prior to the beginning of the ceremonies.

### *Frequency of Major Ceremonies*

Hoffman (1896:91,109) stated that the *Mitawit* Society met only once a year.

In ending this chapter, it should be noted that the *Midewiwin* is widely recognized as one of the best examples of a secret society in North America. It displays most of the characteristics typical of secret societies, and we are fortunate that Hoffman was able to record detailed accounts of this society in the 1890s.

## ALASKA

Birket-Smith (1953:94–5,222) examined the early accounts for the Aleutians, Kodiak Island, and probably Prince William Sound, which were essentially extensions of the Northwest Coast complex hunter/gatherer traditions. He concurred that there existed a form of male secret society in most villages referred to as *AqLat* (“wind”) at contact. These societies involved initiations, the wearing of masks, secret rites, possession of power, the frightening and beating of women, terrorizing families, and blowing of whistles. Among the Aleuts, Webster (1932:220) cited several early sources indicating that there were secret societies before the Russian conquest; however, information appears sparse.

Lantis (1947:28–33; 1970:241) was one of the first to document the existence of a secret society among the Eskimo. She clearly connected this society with whale hunters who formed cult groups having special privileges and dangerous powers or who could use human remains as “poisons.” Male elders seem to have formed a separate rank. At the most productive whaling locations along the Arctic coastline, Sheehan (1985; 1989) argued that large surpluses of meat

and blubber were stored and that the whaling boat owners and organizers (*umialiks*, or big men) became wealthy and powerful, essentially creating complex transegalitarian hunting and gathering societies. In concert with Lantis' identification of cult groups formed by whale hunters, the whaling crews that Sheehan referred to might be considered as a type of secret society. The whaling crews were voluntary, relatively exclusive organizations to which not everyone belonged; they were hierarchically organized; they had the means of producing wealth (and whale products constituted prestige foods and items); the *umialik* was in charge of whaling rituals (both public and secret) and public feasts based on successful whale hunting (Sheehan 1985:128–9). There was also a special structure (the *karigi*) used by the whaling crew for gearing up and for ritual preparations. The *karigi* was constructed under the sponsorship of the *umialik*, and was used for the rituals and ideological support of the whaling crew organization, including supernatural aids for whaling and competitive feasting between rival *umialiks*. The *karigi* was made of whale bone (as opposed to the driftwood used for residential structures), and contained ritual paraphernalia including masks and thick, oil-impregnated soils undoubtedly formed from feasting activities (Sheehan 1989). The *karigi* probably emerged in conjunction with effective whaling around 1000 CE. The *karigi* association affected all aspects of society, the economy, and religion (Whitridge 1995).





PART II

THE OLD WORLD



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### OCEANIA

#### AUSTRALIA

Loeb (1929:250) stated that there were only tribal initiations rather than secret societies in Australia. While the vast majority of the Aboriginal groups in Australia were simple foragers, a case for somewhat greater complexity qualifying as transegalitarian societies can be made for some groups along the Arnhem Land coast and in southeast Australia (Lourandos 1985; Owens and Hayden 1997; Builth 2006). Thus, it is worth examining the possibility that some of these groups may have had secret societies or something similar to them. Aboriginal groups in southeastern Australia were impacted by Europeans at a very early date and ethnographic documentation is comparatively scant. However, Howitt (1904:510–63,641) did report secret initiations of boys by some remaining groups. These involved prolonged journeys and rituals in the higher mountains and many other characteristics of secret societies, although some of these characteristics were common throughout Australia and it is not clear to what extent they were part of secret society rituals as opposed to tribal initiations in southeast Australia.

In his discussion of *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, Elkin (1945:4) observed that, in general, men go through a series of initiations, learning, and various ceremonies, eventually playing a leading part in dreamtime rituals where they become dreamtime heroes in their ritual re-enactments. This constitutes a gray zone between tribal initiations and secret society initiations. Similar practices

of initiations for all community members followed by progressively fewer advancements to high ranks characterized the Wolf Society of the Northwest Coast of America (Chapter 2) and the *Poro* Society in Africa (Chapter 9). In addition, Webster (1932:90–2,140) reported that the Dieri and Aranda had an inner council composed only of high-ranking individuals, with subincision only for selected people of high degree who were given special inter-tribal missions. They were characterized as a “primitive aristocracy.” Full instruction and initiation into the Aranda proceeded through several stages and were only achieved by individuals aged twenty-five to thirty years old. These initiations were also portrayed as the work of spirits (Webster 1932:84–5,91,99). Some Queensland tribes had four degrees of initiation, only the first of which was compulsory for all. Australian totemic groups were compared to secret societies in terms of controlling magic for the reproduction of animal and plant species, with the high-ranking members in control of rituals and representing a cross-section of local groups (Webster 1932:142–3). It is not clear, however, whether membership in the high ranks was voluntary or had wealth requirements or was a normal progression for all males.

In Arnhem Land, the best candidate for a secret society was the *Djanggawul* Cult which focused on sex and fertility (with an explicit recognition of the relationship between copulation and conception, contra the ignorance of the “facts of life” that some anthropologists attribute to Australian Aborigines). It would seem that there may have been some selectivity in accepting members or in divulging cult secrets to members. According to Berndt (1952:14), candidates for the cult “are already fully initiated into manhood, and already possessed of a certain amount of religious knowledge.” In addition, there appears to have been a graded series of levels within the cult since “Years may pass before the complete series has been revealed to them, and it is not as a rule until they have reached middle age that they may take an active part in the ritual” (Berndt 1952:15). However, Nicholas Peterson, who worked extensively in this region, reported that virtually all men were initiated into the *Djanggawul* cult and that the increasing levels of knowledge were simply an age-grading feature, with ritual knowledge increasing with one’s age grade, so that Peterson did not feel that the *Djanggawul* cult qualified as a secret society (personal communication).

This kind of secret initiation may be what Loeb (1932) had in mind when he suggested that Californian secret societies probably developed from secret initiation cults. Age grades such as Peterson described (similar to those in Plains Indian groups of North America) may have served similar functions to secret societies. Despite Peterson’s reservations, the *Djanggawul* cult may have been the closest ritual organization in Australia to a secret society. It exhibited a number of features in common with secret societies that are worth mentioning. These included payment of compensation to the initiators, ritual

mysteries that were claimed to affect essential aspects of life (fertility), the ranking of ritual performances which could only be viewed by the more advanced members, the staged revelation of these mysteries over years, leaders of the cult being from the most powerful “clans,” the symbolic and probably ecstatic “death” of initiates and their resurrection, the restricted rights to sacred dances, songs, and paraphernalia, the regional extent of the cult involving “visitors” from other groups at rituals, and a public ceremony involving dramatic performances (night dancing with torches) (Berndt 1952:6–9, 14–15, 17–22, 294). It is also interesting that one of the central features of the rituals is a sacred painted pole (representing a penis), also a feature of the *Kuksu* Cult in California and many Plains secret societies.

Whether or not the *Djanggawul* cult might be considered in the same light as the Wolf Society of the Nuuchahnulth, where all males were initiated but only a select few reached the higher ranks, is an issue that future research will have to resolve. However, Berndt (1952:294) stated that “Only a *dua* moiety man, belonging to the most powerful *dua* linguistic group and clan, can rise to ceremonial headmanship ... assisted by other men who were correspondingly ‘graded’ in the ritual sphere.” This may indicate significant exclusivity and internal ranking at the more advanced levels of the cult, similar to the organization of the Wolf Society of the Nuuchahnulth.

#### POLYNESIA

There is little information on secret society types of organizations in Polynesia, although it does appear that some forms of secret organizations existed in the past. As Webster (1932:164) noted, there is “Much that is perplexing and apparently contradictory in the various accounts,” specifically of the *Areoi* (amusement) Society and its cognates. Not enough information is available for a comprehensive description; however, the essential features documented by Webster (1932:164–70, 202) were that the *Areoi* members represented gods or the dead on earth, and therefore membership was highly prized and valued. At least some of the “spirits” wore large masks. The leading chiefs could attain high ranks in the society without going through the lower grades. There were between seven and nine ranks. Members were above normal morality, engaged in “unbridled sexual license and infanticide” (both men and women could be members), and had to kill their own children in order to join the society (similar to practices in West Africa described in Chapter 9) as well as pay large amounts to become members (see accounts of James Cook cited by Webster 1932:202). The higher ranks which held the innermost secrets and rituals were so costly that only chiefs and the wealthy could attain them. There were public celebrations at the men’s house such as for the first fruits at which offerings were made to the “gods.”

Members had many privileges and could subsist (“chiefly on the contributions exacted”) by manipulating beliefs and terror “to impose the most shameful extortions,” resulting in an “easy livelihood” (Webster 1932:167). Anyone intruding upon ceremonies was punished with death, while the uninitiated were obliged to stay in their homes at certain times. There were six lodges on Tahiti and six others on nearby islands, indicating a regional structure for the organization. Performers traveled from island to island where they were fed and fêted, leading to a comfortable life. Similar societies were reported for the Carolines (the *Uritoi* Society), the Mariannes, the Hawaiian islands, the Marquesas, Tuamotu, Guam, New Zealand (the *Whare Kura* Society), and probably other islands. The *Whare Kura* Society, in particular, was a society for “priests,” possessing esoteric knowledge that conferred strange powers on a few select members who performed public exhibitions of those powers. Training took five years of seclusion in a special structure, and no women were allowed entry.

There were at least some accounts of *marae* temples being used by *Areoi* members, according to Webster (1932:168fn), and he postulated that this might have been a more general pattern in the past. Like many secret society clubhouses, the *marae* were located “in some retired spot in the heart of gloomy woods” (Webster 1932:167). Only the initiated could practice “the mysteries” there, some of which included human sacrifices and cannibalism. High-ranking dead were buried in or around the *marae*, and the uninitiated generally had an extreme dread of the structures and their vicinities. All of the above features appear to conform to characteristics of secret societies in this and other chapters, so it seems likely that an elite secret society did exist in Polynesia although details are sparse.

#### THE AINU

On the fringes of Oceania, it is possible that the Ainu bear ceremonies (*Iyomande*) constituted a form of secret society, referred to by Munro (1963:85) as a “secret cult” for people of “good repute.” While some Ainu cultivated a variety of domestic crops, others did not cultivate any plants (Ölschleger 1999:214) and can be considered as examples of complex hunter/gatherers. Participation in the bear ceremony is probably the best candidate among the Ainu for a ritual organization resembling a secret society. Bears were raised by well-off elders of patrilineages who also performed the rituals. It is clear that wealthy elders participated in each other’s ceremonies and feasts and used these events to display their wealth and personal political power (Ohnuki-Tierney 1999:240–1; Watanabe 1999:201). Thus, participants appear to have cut across kinship lines. While there were public rituals and performances, including the actual killing of bears, these were preludes to the secret worship and bear rituals that included four spirits: the eagle-owl, fox, divine wife, and women above the clouds. There were many spirits that could

take on animal forms and which needed to be appeased (Munro 1963:88,144). Dealing with them required “esoteric” knowledge (Munro 1963:84,153). Millet beer was the sacred drink served to the elders in special prestige lacquer bowls at these ceremonies; bear meat was the main feasting food together with special millet dumplings and soup (Munro 1963:69,75,170).

#### MELANESIA: INTRODUCTION

There is certainly nothing more characteristic of Melanesian life than the presence of Societies which celebrate Mysteries strictly concealed from the uninitiated and from all females.

(Codrington 1891:69)

There is great ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity in the Melanesian area, including New Guinea and the major island groups like the New Hebrides and the Banks Islands (Speiser 1996). Ritual organizations also varied in Oceania. Secret societies of some renown occurred in the Banks Islands and the New Hebrides (Fig. 7.1). While many secret societies like the *Tamate* appear to have been suppressed by early missionaries and government policies, there were at least some oral history accounts of them gathered at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. However, details are not always clear, especially given the proliferation of different societies and their varying characteristics. For example, Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:384) stated that the *Nimangki Tlel* Society was very similar to the *Tamate* Society as well as to the *Nalawan* Society (in Seniang) but elsewhere they equate it to the *Suque*, *Moli*, *Mangge*, and the women's *Lapas* Societies (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:478,455).

#### *Secret societies or not?*

The *Suque* Societies in these islands occupied a somewhat ambiguous status. Some authors like Speiser (1996:337,342,402) maintained that they were secret societies – or at least were “a special form of the secret societies” (Speiser 1996:402) and were probably originally typical secret societies that may have undergone some changes with European contact. Other authors like Codrington (1891:102–3) argued that *Suque* groups did not constitute secret societies with a focus on religion, or at least were “not a secret society of the same kind.” I favor Speiser's views. Even if Codrington may be technically correct, Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:271,384–5,706) repeatedly observed that the secret societies and the men's grade societies (in the form of *Nimangki* or *Suque* groups) were inter-related and had the same rites and paraphernalia used in the same fashions; they used the same structures, had the same basic organization, and used the same names and symbols for high ranks. Thus, these similarities make observations on the *Suque* Societies germane to investigations of secret societies.





The proliferation and inter-relationships of the secret societies in these areas were complex and can be bewildering, but the following is an attempt to outline some aspects of the major societies. The *Nalawan* Society was simply a more religious form of the *Nimangki* Society with a special emphasis on the dead and funeral rituals. The *Nalawan* Society used masks and played bamboo cylinders as well as using bullroarers as the voices of spirits (these were also sacred sounds of the *Nevinbur* Society). The *Nimangki* Society did not have these features or had them to a less degree (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:385,432–3,462). The *Nalawan* Society was also comparable to the *Nevinbur* Society, the most sacred of the secret societies, which emphasized death and resurrection in its rituals (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:386,461–2). The *Tamate* Society in the Banks Islands (also known as the Sacred *Suque*) was seen as the equivalent of the *Nimangki Tlel* Society on Malekula (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:455). Only *Tamate* members achieved high ranks in the *Suque* Society, but to be a *Tamate* member, one had to first be initiated into the *Suque* Society (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:271). Speiser (1996:337) noted that all the secret societies, including the *Suque*, made use of connections with the dead, something which Codrington (1891:70) also observed. Moreover, although Speiser (1996:371–2) thought that the “secrets” of the *Suque* Societies had atrophied leaving only the rituals, it was also clear that the high-ranking members had enormous power owing to the belief that they possessed a great deal of *mana* (supernatural power), which was in part acquired through their rank in the *Suque* and their special relationships with past rank holders, the bones of past people with *mana*, and the privileged ability to intercede with powerful, dangerous supernatural deities (see “Sources of Wealth” below).

Both the *Suque* and the *Tamate* Societies were viewed by ethnographers as degraded secret societies as a result of missionary activities and contact with colonial powers (Webster 1932:128,130fn). Codrington (1891:71,86,91,93) repeatedly stressed that there were no secrets involved in any of the societies other than the revelation that the masked performers were not spirits but merely men and that the strange sounds were not spirit voices but special instrumental effects. However, the possession by high-ranking individuals of headdresses, statues, and monoliths that were claimed to have the potential to harm or even kill the uninitiated or those of lower rank (e.g., Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:479) is a strong indication that acquisition of supernatural power was still an important feature of many of these societies. Secret societies elsewhere in the world made similar claims to supernatural powers.

Codrington (1891:92) also emphasized that initiation into these societies was not a tribal initiation, nor was it a requirement for marriage, but was undertaken to become a person of some consequence. As on the American Plains (Chapter 5), there was evidently considerable variability among such organizations in the degree of emphasis on the supernatural versus the secular, as

well as in the use of masks, exclusivity, entry fees or lack thereof, esoteric knowledge, supernatural threats, and other secret society characteristics (Codrington 1891:77; Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:385,434). The issue was complicated (as in other areas like the American Plains and Northwest) by the co-existence of other societies concerned primarily with amusement and socializing (e.g., Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:469). Clear examples of secret societies graded into other forms of voluntary or tribal organizations which functioned to promote success in warfare, or provided simple entertainment via music and dance and feasting, and/or initiated younger members into full adult status.

In the case of the *Suque* Society, most male members of communities became members as a requirement for social success; however, the higher ranks which conferred considerable power could only be attained by payment of high prices on the part of ambitious and talented men (like the Wolf Society of the Nuuchahnulth and the *Poro* Society in West Africa). Similarly, in situations where there were multiple secret societies, it might be the case that all adults belonged to at least one such society, although each society might only consist of a small segment of the entire community.

### *Characteristics and Distribution*

In the New Hebrides, most initiations into secret societies involved the setting up of statues under temporary structures within a sacred area around a clubhouse; the payment of pigs and other valued items to the seller or mentor of the grade; payments to others providing various services or paraphernalia; some form of dancing; and the killing and consumption of pigs. Rituals and payments became more and more complex in the higher rank initiations (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:287–8).

In New Guinea, few authors have phrased their observations or interpretations in the specific vocabulary of secret society organizations. Allen (1967:8), for example, discussed “voluntary” ritual organizations in Melanesia that could be joined at any age, as long as fees were paid and the membership agreed to admit an individual. He explicitly included “secret societies” as examples where the goal was to hoax and bully novices and non-initiates, and where male status differences were emphasized, especially in terms of age (and presumably rank). He contrasted these societies with tribal initiations where the goal was to subjugate women, deceive them, and share the full range of male secrets with all initiates (Allen 1967:38). However, it seems that at least among some groups, especially in the Highlands where European contact only occurred in the 1940s, ritual organizations fit the definition of, and operated as, secret societies.

The *Ganekhe* groups and Sun Cults described by Hampton (1999:127,137,146,156,161,209–10), in particular, seem to fit the definitions

of secret societies since they were esoteric socioreligious groups; voluntary organizations with powerful leaders; often regional in scope; and centered around the use of powerful spirit objects (stones representing the ancestors or the sun) which had the ability to affect health, food, procreation, conflicts, weather, pigs, and personal concerns as was typical of secret societies in other regions. As with secret societies in the New Hebrides, *Ganekhe* groups in New Guinea portrayed ancestors as powerful forms of spirits that were embodied in sacred stones and could be influenced by appropriate rituals (Hampton 1999:148).

In the New Hebrides, the ritual physical structures of the *Suque* Societies were generally referred to as “clubhouses,” with several local name variants (*gamal*, *amel*, *loghor*, *salago*). These structures varied in use from group to group, but in general, Allen (1967:104) characterized them as used for rank-taking rituals, feasts, dances, wealth displays at rites of passage, and socializing. In all cases they were exclusively for men’s (usually only *Suque* members’) use, sometimes only for feasting occasions (as on Pentecost Island), but sometimes graded into bachelors’ residences or even sleeping quarters for all men (Speiser 1996:113,337,344), and they were sometimes used for men’s daily meal preparations and consumption, with different sections of the structure designated for use by different ranks of members, each with its own hearth. All clubhouses and ritual structures of secret societies were taboo to non-members (Speiser 1996:342).

Allen (1967:11) made the important observation that age grades appeared to be weak or absent where men formed single exogamous patrilineal descent groups (with all married women coming from other groups). Age grades provided another alternative way, besides secret societies, of forming organizations that cross-cut kinship groups.

In the following sections I have focused on the organizations that have been described in the most detail in the literature, although there may be brief references to minor secret societies or secret societies with less recorded detail such as the *Dukduk* Society (the only secret association that I have information on in the Bismark archipelago; cf. Webster 1932:109–14).

## OVERVIEW

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

While “prestige,” however defined, was often given as a motive for joining or forming secret societies, at least in the New Hebrides, it was occasionally made clear that “great earthly advantages” (Speiser 1996:372) were

involved in becoming a member as well. Given the wealth and power at stake, it is probably not surprising that there was keen competition, with many intrigues, for high-ranking positions. Lodges also competed with each other with the result that the individuals who achieved the highest ranks were “outstanding, but not admirable personalities” (Speiser 1996:250). Leaders sometimes acquired large regional followings that could have evolved into more centralized political organizations; however, their followings depended on individual abilities. Given the competition between individuals, regional political organizations were highly unstable and usually fell apart with the demise of the individual leaders.

In addition, anyone could start a new secret society so that there was a constant flux in their compositions. Some prospered while others failed. The major motivation for creating or joining secret societies was to extend influence and increase wealth. Entire ritual complexes were bought and sold between communities, and societies strove to elaborate rituals in order to attract purchasers and thereby increase the number of pigs in the society. There was a constant endeavor to enhance the impact of society rituals, a dynamic that Emerson and Pauketat (2008:167,183) have invoked to explain the ascendance of ritual centers like Cahokia. The striving to create ever more impressive rituals was similar in New Guinea.

### **Sources of Wealth**

Speiser (1996) was unusually perceptive in his observations on the means used by high-ranking individuals to acquire wealth. Payments were made by candidates directly to those who were selling their positions in the societies, but also to those providing goods or services for the initiations. In addition, high-ranking men were the only ones who owned tusked pigs which were required for initiations into all advanced grades, so that most candidates had to borrow heavily, with interest rates up to 100 percent, to obtain tusked pigs. The support of high-ranking individuals was essential for advancement, and they exacted many gifts for that support. High-ranking individuals acquired so much power that they could use manipulation, intimidation, terror, robbery, and even murder with impunity to get what they wanted. While candidates often went heavily into debt, they generally recouped all of their expenses as a result of holding a higher office.

### **Relation to Politics**

In the New Hebrides, the village heads were the highest ranking members of the *Suque* Society, while in New Guinea, only big men were members of the Sun Cult.

*Tactics***Ideology**

In the ideology of secret societies in the New Hebrides, contact with ancestral spirits, especially those who were powerful in life such as high-ranking secret society members, was the key link to the supernatural world and the benefits that could be derived from it. Membership in secret societies was supposed to provide access to these spirits through objects that held spirit *mana*. These were the secrets of the society. Ancestral spirits resided in ancestral remains, masks, and statues or paraphernalia, some with the power to harm or kill unqualified users or those coming into contact with such objects. Pigs, particularly tusked pigs, were needed to empower ancestral spirits. The same basic concepts characterized secret societies in New Guinea with a special focus on dangerous spirits of the dead and on sacred stones as the abode of ancestral spirits (Hampton 1999:24).

Contact with spirits was promoted by societies as beneficial for fertility, health, and wealth in New Guinea, and this may have been the case in island Melanesia as well. In the New Hebrides, contact with the spirits seems to have resulted in the terrorizing of entire islands during ceremonies, much as on the American Northwest Coast (Chapter 2). Ceremonies could include beatings of the uninitiated and destruction of their property together with the imposition of taboos. Benefits were made visible in terms of showing off finery in public displays.

**Internal Hierarchies, Exclusivity, and Initiation Costs**

Internal hierarchies and exclusivity were characteristic of all secret societies, with only the most gifted and wealthy achieving the highest ranks and obtaining access to the most powerful secrets. Initiation costs in the New Hebrides varied according to the secret society concerned and the rank sought, but generally involved about 10 pigs for entry to a major society and up to 100 pigs for higher grades, although there are anecdotal accounts of 300 piglets being sacrificed for one initiation, and 500–1,000 pigs being involved in another case (see below). One individual even claimed to have sacrificed 7,500 pigs in his career. In addition, special yam gardens had to be planted for initiation feasts. It is little wonder that some candidates became destitute and were reduced to poverty if they poorly managed their finances.

While, in theory, anyone could join the secret societies in the New Hebrides – provided they could pay the initiation fees – it is clear that only the very wealthy and powerful could achieve the higher ranks. In New Guinea, only high-ranking males possessed *mana* stones and

performed important rites, and, as noted above, only big men could be members of the regional Sun Cult. However, all men theoretically belonged to some ancestral stone (*Ganekhe*) group, although there were some groups composed only of “worthless ones.”

### **Enforcement**

In order to achieve acquiescence to the claims of supernatural power and the ideology promulgated by the society, various coercive means were employed by society members for those who did not follow their dictates willingly. These included fines, beatings, and killings (ostensibly by the “spirits”) for such things as unauthorized use of society badges or paraphernalia, trespass or peeking into society areas, injuring society members, breaking taboos or social rules, revealing secrets (especially revealing human bearers of masks) or errors in performances, and transgressions of rank.

Before European contact, cannibalism is thought to have been part of secret societies in the New Hebrides, with some individuals claiming to have eaten a hundred men. However, whether this was part of enforcement threats or part of the terror experienced by initiates is unclear.

### **Use of Ecstasy**

As in many other culture areas, ecstatic states were induced during initiations through the use of seclusion, fasting, sleep deprivation, drumming, chanting, physically painful ordeals, and emotional shocks (e.g., masked performances, terrifying scenes of destruction, human sacrifices, and indulging in cannibalism). Such measures were probably employed to induce ecstatic experiences of the supernatural entities featured in the society. Severe ordeals undoubtedly also served to secure candidates’ devotion to the society and ensure the keeping of secrets.

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

Items used by secret societies in the New Hebrides were varied and included pig tusks, bullroarers, wood drums, rattles, bamboo flutes, wood tubes, shell trumpets and armlets, turtle shell armlets, beads, masks, nose inserts, hawk feathers, wood or stone statues, menhirs, quartz crystals, spears and arrows, and collections or displays of human and animal bones, especially mandibles and plastered human skulls.

#### **Structures**

The “headquarters” of secret societies in the New Hebrides could be near villages or far away, or in part of a village separated from residences by a fence (Fig. 7.2). The architecture generally was distinctive (Figs. 7.3 and



7.4), with sizes of structures ranging up to 35 meters in length, depending on the wealth of the head of the society. Sacred items were made in the “clubhouses.” The distant clubhouses were only occupied during the seclusion and initiation period for new initiates. Large collections or displays of pig and human bones were associated with the structures. Dancing grounds up to 100 meters long and 60 meters wide were usually adjacent to the clubhouses. In some areas, long rows of menhirs (explicitly compared to the Neolithic stone arrangements at Carnac) were set up leading to the dancing grounds, each stone representing a pig or enemy killed by someone of high rank. Stone sacrificial tables, comparable to dolmens, as well as stone walls, stone benches, and ancestral houses lined dancing grounds in some areas, with wood drums up to 20 feet high also erected in the grounds (Figs. 7.5).

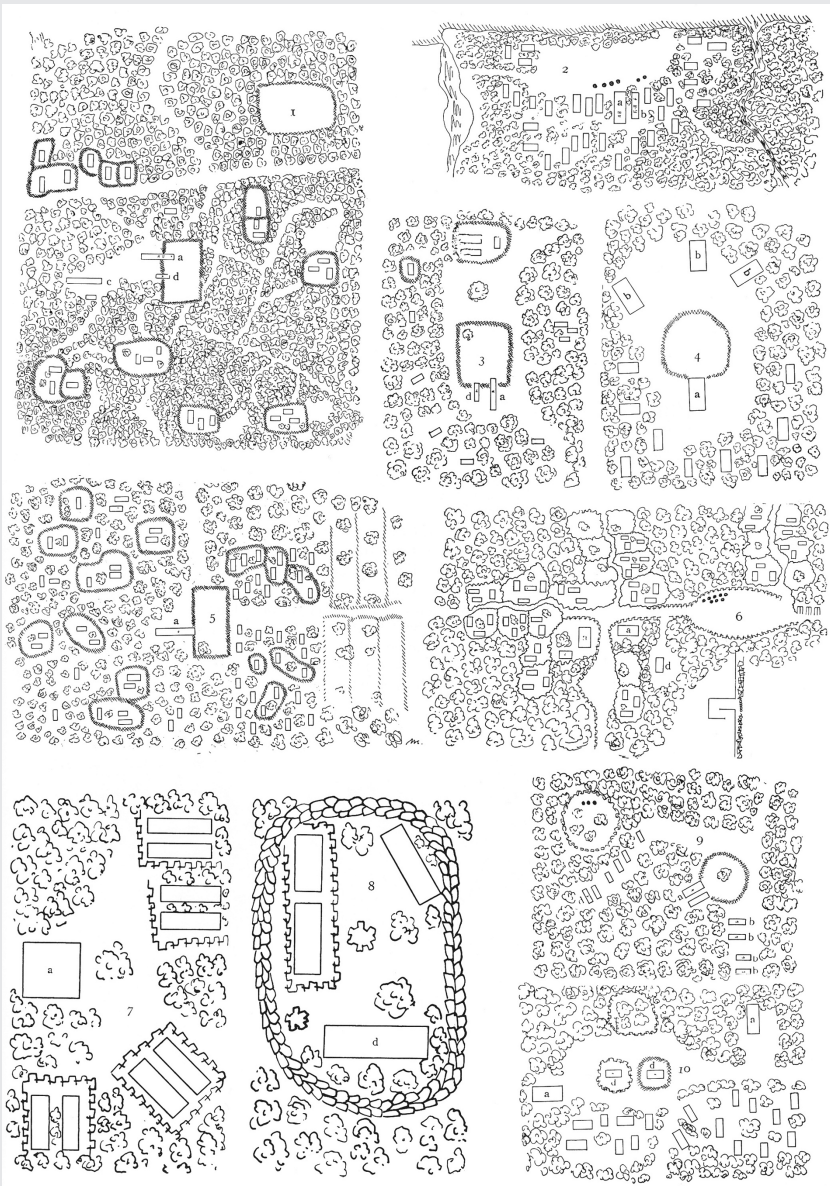
In New Guinea, the sacred structures or compounds where ancestral stones were kept were located in secret groves either near dance grounds or scattered over the landscape, the more important of which had resident caretakers.

### **Burials**

High-ranking secret society members in the New Hebrides were buried in a walled, restricted area in the back of clubhouses or were enshrined in life-sized statues surmounted by their plastered skulls (Figs. 7.6 and 7.7). In some areas, their skulls were buried separately or they were buried in cemeteries near the clubhouse, under large stones or monoliths, or in secret places to prevent pilfering of the supernaturally powerful remains. In other areas important deceased members were buried in special houses about fifteen minutes from the clubhouse or under mounds or stone altars, or in small houses for ancestors (the skulls only) around the dancing grounds (Fig. 7.8). In all cases, it seemed that there were special procedures and locations for burying high-ranking members, often in remote or difficult to access locations, and frequently involving special treatment of skulls. In particular, *Nimangki* rites always began with the exhumation of the skull of a high-ranking member, then placing it in a stone slab box. Only high-ranking members were treated to secondary burials.

### **Number of Societies and Proportion of Population**

Rather than having only one society in a community, it appears that the manifest advantages of belonging to a society led to varying numbers of imitation societies. Thus, large villages in the New Hebrides could be associated with three or four clubhouses. On Torres Island, it is said that there were up to a hundred secret societies with some people having memberships in several of them. Some societies involved only small



7.2 Maps of village layouts from six islands in the New Hebrides, showing (a) men's clubhouse; (b) women's clubhouse; (c) former men's clubhouse; (d) chief's house (Speiser 1923:Plate 10).

segments of the community, while others involved almost the entire male or female population at least at the entry level. Boys usually joined at seven or eight years of age, although high-ranking children could join earlier, even as infants. In New Guinea, all Dani were expected to join one or more of the ancestral stone cults.

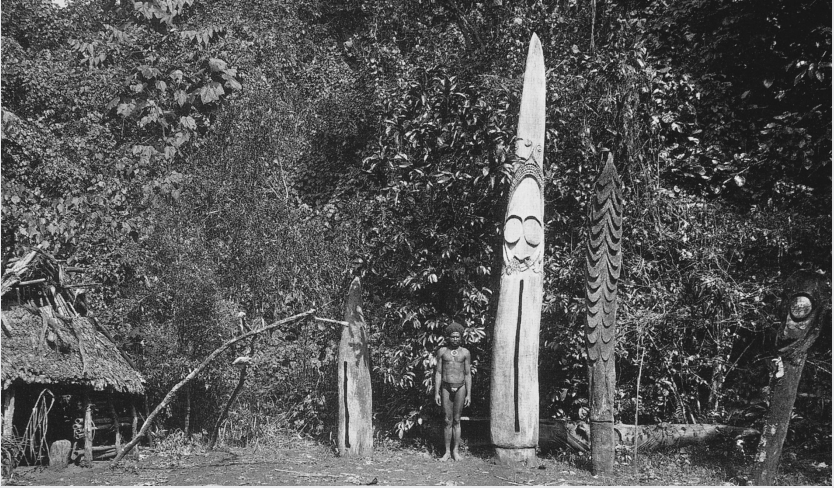


7.3 A men's clubhouse on Ambrym Island. Note the large central pieces of coral in the wall around the clubhouse, and the sculpted drum, or "gong," on the edge of the dancing ground at far left (Speiser 1923:Plate 16.1).



7.4 The exterior of a men's clubhouse on Venua Leva Island. While some clubhouses are relatively simple and plain (scarcely distinctive from other structures), others, like this one, are architecturally elaborate. Note the stone base (wall) of the structure, the plaited wall, and the carved posts representing stylized pig jaws. The interior is shown in Fig. 7.10 (Speiser 1923:Plate 104.5).





7.5 A men's clubhouse (at left) on Ambrym Island and the edge of the associated dancing ground showing the impressive wood "gongs" or drums used in rituals (Speiser 1923:Plate 97.3).



7.6 The interior wall of a clubhouse in southern Malekula Island, displaying statues of past officials that incorporate their skulls modeled with a plastic compound to appear lifelike (Speiser 1923:Plate 80.3).

### **Regional Organization, Styles, and Power Animals**

It is quite clear that *Suque* – and probably other societies' – memberships cross-cut kinship groups at the clan level and served to create regional organizations and networks, particularly involving the highest ranking



7.7 Two skulls of secret society officials from southern Malekula that have been modeled with a plastic compound to make them appear lifelike. Note the inclusion of boar's tusks in the lower face (Speiser 1923:Plate 81.7,11).



7.8 Houses for ancestral spirits and stone altars on the edge of a dancing ground in eastern Malekula. Note also the wooden "gongs" or drums at far right (Speiser 1923:Plate 88.6).

members of societies. Secret societies were explicitly recognized as a means of creating large-scale political networks that transcended the limitations of kinship-based organizations. There was considerable inter-village participation by those of high rank in rituals and initiations. This appears to have resulted in regional art styles involving secret society motifs, in particular stylized images of pig tusks, humans, and power animals. Power animals included lizards for low ranks, fish (sharks) for mid-ranks, and birds (especially hawks) for high ranks, all of which were carved on interior posts within designated rank areas in the clubhouse. Such features seem reminiscent of the structures at Göbekli Tepe where power animals and birds were depicted on central pillars.

In New Guinea, similar regional organizations, particularly of the Sun Cult, resulted in confederacies that were probably important militarily and economically as well as ritually.

### **Gender**

Some societies had special roles for women, such as the ritual “wife” of the *Suque* head who provided sexual services to members. Otherwise women, as uninitiated people, constituted targets for terrorizing by most secret societies in Melanesia. In a few areas there were secret societies exclusively for women; however, these were not highly esteemed and the highest ranks of the women’s societies were considered as on a par with the lowest rank of the *Suque* Society, with ultimate control of women’s societies resting in the hands of the leader of the men’s societies.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:272) considered “prestige” as the major motivation for people to join the *Nimangki* Society on Malekula. However, Speiser (1996:364) had earlier observed that it was the economic and power benefits of membership that created “keen competition” to attain the high ranks and only the really clever succeeded. Intrigues were rife when it actually came time to surrender pigs for advancement to high positions. The loans required to finance these advancements resulted in “extraordinarily complex” negotiations that often collapsed as a result of rivalries. Thus, shortages of pigs could occur at the last minute, thereby thwarting or delaying bids for advancement (Speiser 1996:364).

In the New Hebrides, Speiser (1996:307) noted that rituals (presumably including the *Suque* and other secret societies) were always in flux largely due to the “elderly, whose constant endeavor is to enhance the impact of religious and magical rites” in order to extend their influence and augment their wealth. Tellingly, Codrington (1891:75) noted that “Any one might start a new society, and gather round him his co-founders ... Some such new foundations will succeed and flourish, some will fail.” This is remarkably similar to statements about the secret societies on the Northwest Coast and the Plains (Chapters 2 and 5) and seems to indicate an important underlying dynamic of many secret societies. Larcom (1980:131,152,212) added that the *Nimangki* system (including songs, dances, art paraphernalia, and “customs”) was bought and sold between ethnic groups on Malekula, including a women’s version of the organization. “Each community sought to elaborate its ceremonial complex to attract purchasers that would increase their supply of pigs” (Larcom 1980:212). Therefore, aspects of new cults were regularly being introduced and there was no fixed form or content of rituals (in contrast to invariable Australian totemic rites or rituals of “scriptural” religions). Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:279,337) also reported that the high *Nimangki* grades were introduced from other groups and that people in other regions had adopted the *Nimangki* rituals within living memory. Anyone could start a new secret society or introduce new ritual elements (Speiser 1996:337).

Speiser (1996:343) further noted that the *Suque* was merged with ancestor cults, implying that at some time in the past the two were separate organizations. He also recorded the constant carrying of weapons during feasts and the performance of mock combats led by the *Suque* candidate (Speiser 1996:366,368,374). He thought that before Europeans arrived, the main sacrifices in the *Suque* groups were probably humans, especially war captives, instead of pigs (326,370,373–4). These observations may indicate an earlier military role for the *Suque* or other secret societies.

In sum, the “earthly advantages” were greater than those of the next world and “impel a man to seek promotion in ranks” (Speiser 1996:372). Speiser concluded that high-ranking *Suque* men were “outstanding but not admirable personalities” (250).

In New Guinea, new cults were constantly introduced, added on to, tried out, spread, or discontinued (Barth 1987:53). The high-ranking members of the Mbowamb group purchased the Stone Fertility Cult from the Enga in the 1880s, while the Mendi purchased new cults periodically, including the Stone Cult (*Kepele*) in which sacred stones embodied ancestors (Allen 1967:43,45).

### Sources of Wealth

Speiser (1996) is one of the few ethnographers to discuss in some detail the financial dynamics related to secret societies. Boars with circular tusks were strongly



connected to *Suque* rituals and ranks. “Tusked” boars (with circular tusks), especially with several loops, were the main type of wealth since they required special breeding. Their upper teeth had to be knocked out to make the lower tusks grow in circles. When the tusks reached a certain diameter, the boars had to be fed for several years by women because they could no longer close their mouths, making them very labor intensive to produce, and requiring a number of wives to raise them (Speiser 1996:144–5,247). Where the *Suque* was important, tusked boars constituted the basis for the entire political economy and social structure.

Advancement to any rank in the *Nimangki* and *Nevinbur* Societies required large-scale payments of pigs to the seller of the rank position and for the purchase of the required badges or paraphernalia (see “Initiation Costs”). Tusked pig sacrifices were required for marriage and advancement to higher ranks in the *Suque*. Since such pigs were owned by the rich (i.e., those with high *Suque* rank), it was generally necessary to borrow from the highest ranking *Suque* men who provided credit, usually at 100 percent interest (Speiser 1996:248,364). It often took years to arrange enough pigs for the events (364).

Because so much depended on the men in high *Suque* ranks, they could exact high payments for their help and cooperation, and as creditors they “ruthlessly squeezed debtors dry” (Speiser 1996:249). They “terrorized” and manipulated others to obtain what they wanted, including the use of robbery, intimidation, and murder. As a result, there were many disputes over repayments, but the creditors did not hesitate to act despotically owing to the magic powers that they claimed to have, so that opponents were often liquidated (249,355). “It is belief in the potent mana of men of high rank which gives them their esteem and they exploit this belief in every possible way in order to indulge in whatever may be to their advantage and profit” (356).

Others must earn his favour by gifts so that he does not place difficulties in their way when they seek promotion in the *Suque* ... promotion to the next highest grade brings a man into a sphere of denser mana, both through the rise in rank as such and through community with other men of the same grade ... He therefore enjoys particularly close relations with mighty souls, and the higher in rank he rises, the mightier are the souls he has to do with.

(Speiser 1996:355)

Thus, candidates had to curry favor with high-ranking men by giving “gifts and services of every kind” and by supporting them in all enterprises, resulting in large retinues for high-ranking individuals (364). To rise in rank, it was necessary to give pigs, feasts, and wealth mats to the *Suque*. As noted in the “Motives and Dynamics” section, there was “keen competition” for the high ranks owing to the major economic and other benefits.

The system of borrowing and loaning resulted in a “highly developed credit system” (Speiser 1996:364) in which everyone was in debt to everyone else,

creating a “net which is impossible to disentangle and which is cast over the whole population without hope of escape” (355). The upshot of this system was that a *Suque* candidate “destroyed all his material assets ... He now has debts on all sides, but his rank very soon allows him to make good his material losses” (369). In sum, as noted in the discussion of “Motives,” the “earthly advantages” of the *Suque* were far greater than those of the next world and impelled men to compete for advancements (372).

Another source of wealth for those in high ranks was selling amulets at high prices to ambitious men (Speiser 1996). Songs were also owned and sold (380). Because women were critical to the production of tusked boars, the wealthy and high-ranking members of the *Suque* were generally polygynous and “bought” women at very young ages as wives (261–2). Wives were considered to be owned by their clans, which arranged their marriages, but they were treated as the property of their husbands.

One of the pecuniary privileges of *Tamate* membership was the ability to taboo the use of resources except for oneself, including the use of land. Members also shared in the fines levied by the society (Webster 1932:110).

In the Bismarks, the *Dukduk* law “bears down most unequally upon the weaker members of the community, upon those who for one reason or another have been unable to join the society or have incurred the enmity of its powerful associates. Its forced contributions impoverish those who are already poor, while those who are rich enough to join share in the profits of the mystery” largely derived from fraud and intimidation (Webster 1932:110–11). Anyone who has “failed to provide an adequate supply on the occasion of its [the *Dukduk* spirit’s] last appearance ... receives a pretty strong hint to the effect that the *Dukduk* is displeased with him, and there is no fear of his offending twice” (111). The society had the power to impose fines and kill with impunity (114). The old men who had the power to summon the *Dukduk* claimed that they were too weak to work so that others needed to give them food. The old men of the *Dukduk* “by working on the superstitions of the rest, secure for themselves a comfortable old age and unbounded influence” (111). During initiations, a “vast pile of food is collected” from every man and taken to the bush to be used by society members (113).

### Political Connections

Village heads in the New Hebrides were the highest ranking members of the *Suque*, and *Suque* ranks were important in all sociopolitical life (Speiser 1996:97,342).

In New Guinea, the leaders of the Sun Cult of the Dani were big men from separate moieties and lineages involved in major alliances (Hampton 1999:209–10).

### *Tactics*

#### **Ideology**

Speiser (1996:343) noted that the *Suque* was merged with ancestor cults (mainly of previous holders of *Suque* ranks). Ancestors were viewed as the key link between the living world and obtaining favors and material benefits from divinities in the supernatural world. Some divinities were dangerous if humans came into contact with them (Speiser 1996:322,337). High-ranking *Suque* men were considered to have great *mana* (hence they could achieve high rank). And ghosts of powerful men retained their power after death so that people sought out their spirits for aid. People with little *mana* were equally powerless when they became ghosts (Codrington 1891:125,254). Since the *Suque* used spirits of the dead to influence more powerful spirits, and since high-ranking members' spirits had the most ability to do so, it followed logically that the spirits of high-ranking deceased *Suque* members would be the main focus for rituals.

Each rank had its own spirit effigy (with specific designs for that rank) which was inhabited by the dead members of that rank (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:280–1). Statues (*temes*), whether of wood or stone, were treated as the home of spirits of the former (deceased) members of specific grades in the society, including the original founder of the grade. The statues possessed the special powers of each grade (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:280–1). The possession by high-ranking individuals of headdresses, statues, and monoliths that had the potential to harm or even kill uninitiated people or those of lower rank (e.g., Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:479) is a strong indication that acquisition of supernatural power was an important feature of most of these societies.

Another ideological premise in the New Hebrides was that the sacrifice of pigs was necessary as food for the departed souls and for a happy afterlife. If no pigs were sacrificed for the dead, then the afterlife was miserable and demons could destroy their souls (Speiser 1996:294,356). Such ideological premises clearly advantaged individuals who wanted to create an economic base for power. The *Suque* guaranteed that members could acquire more *mana* via access to the *mana* of the dead in each grade. The dead became like gods in their roles and powers (Speiser 1996:371–2,402). These were the aspects that constituted esoteric knowledge.

Like groups in the New Hebrides, the ideology of the esoteric group leaders of the Dani of New Guinea contended that there were many malevolent spirits, but that the leaders could control these forces to benefit people by using powerful ancestral spirits as key intermediaries (Hampton 1999:156). They could also transform the ghosts of the dead into powerful ancestral spirits by means of pig sacrifices that induced the ancestral spirits to take up residence

in the sacred *Ganekhe* stones, kept in sacred bundles with other power objects owned by the esoteric groups (155, 159, 185). Ancestors were essentially deified within the sacred stones (148). The power of these *Ganekhe* stones was then transferred to individuals in the group. The sun could be similarly influenced and was portrayed as powerful and beneficial, and necessary for all success (156). All big men were considered as having great spiritual power and therefore were viewed as shamans, according to Hampton (1999:24), although some appear to have been more powerful than others and did most of the training in the use of power packets (185).

Members of the *Dukduk* Society in the Bismark archipelago did not consider themselves to be bound by taboos or beliefs in spirits (Webster 1932:109).

### Esoteric Knowledge

Although Speiser (1996:342, 371–2) thought that the *Suque* had lost all of its “secrets” by 1920, the high-ranking members still made substantial use of “theatrical secrecy” and they were considered as adepts in magic as well as having privileged access to ancestral spirits that could convey powerful *mana* to them (Speiser 1996:ibid., 370; see “Ideology” and “Treatment of the Dead”). As mentioned in the discussion of “Ideology,” the possession by high-ranking individuals of headdresses, statues, and monoliths that had the potential to harm or even kill the uninitiated or those of lower rank (e.g. Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:479) is a strong indication that acquisition of supernatural power was an important feature of many of these societies.

The Mendi of New Guinea had an elaborate stone cult in which esoteric spells and knowledge were purchased (Allen 1967:45). The Dani stone *Ganekhe* Cult described by Hampton (1999) was probably the same. Barth (1987:25, 48) made the interesting observation that the ritual heads held the highest secret knowledge, but that this was only used every ten years and that secret knowledge or paraphernalia was often lost due to the death of leaders. Therefore, it seems that new secret knowledge must have been constantly fabricated.

### Exclusivity

Any male could join a secret society in the New Hebrides as long as he could pay the entry fee; however, attaining high ranks in the *Suque* was largely determined by wealth since pig sacrifices were required for advancement (Speiser 1996:304, 337). Some secret societies were difficult to join; for others, all men were expected to join (Speiser 1996:338). On Malekula, there were “also groups of people in the community who are never allowed to enter the *Nimangki* at all” (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:347). They were not permitted to have many pigs and did not eat in the *Nimangki* clubhouse. Various secret societies owned specific rights to songs, dances, plants, animals, and birds which only they could eat or use (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:440–1).

The Mbowamb of New Guinea had eight social classes. Only the high-ranking males engaged in *moka* exchanges or feasts (including associated magical practices and entry fees) and the most important rituals of the men's cult. Only they possessed sacred stones for their "stone fertility cult" which they purchased in the 1880s from the Enga. The highest ranks formed a "closed cult community" from which lower ranks were excluded. Nor could men in lower ranks own sacred stones (Allen 1967:41–4). Only one third of the Bimin-Kuskusmin novices were selected for intensive esoteric training, and ritual leaders were only chosen from that group (Barth 1987:12). All men of the Dani apparently belonged to one or another of the *Ganekhe* groups, according to Hampton (1999:127), who also stated that there were even *Ganekhe* groups for "worthless ones," which implies that the *Ganekhe* groups were ranked among themselves (128). The Sun Cult of the Dani included the most important big men of the region and seems to have been extremely exclusive (209–10).

Thus, as in other culture areas, there was substantial variation in the size and exclusivity of secret societies in Melanesia, ranging from very inclusive organizations, usually with high ranks being very exclusive, to small organizations with highly exclusive memberships.

### Initiation Costs

Initiation fees for entry into secret societies varied, with some having heavy entry fees. In general, admission to entry levels required a valued pig and various shell or mat money payments, as well as cooking for the older members (Codrington 1891:77,90; Speiser 1996:337). A candidate who entered a *Suque* group had to give a "great banquet" to everyone in the clubhouse after the period of seclusion and fasting (Codrington 1891:103,107; Speiser 1996:363).

Promotion to high ranks required the giving of a public feast. Advancement to the mid-level ranks required ten tusked pigs and sixty ordinary pigs, plus wealth mats (Speiser 1996:355,357). Much of the payment for acquiring ranks apparently went to the seller of the rank (as on the Plains, see Chapter 5) and to the seller of the required paraphernalia (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:272,375). A pig also had to be paid to every person providing any kind of a service or ritual item for the candidate (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:289,461).

For the initiation of boys into the lowest *Nimangki* grade, ten pigs had to be paid, with an additional five pigs being required for every additional grade up to a hundred pigs or more (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:348). Speiser (1996:368) seemed to allude to the killing of 300 piglets which were thrown into the sea, apparently as part of a *Suque* advancement to a high degree. Elsewhere, he cited Doniau (1893) as reporting the killing of 500–1,000 *ravés* (presumably the same as *raue*, or valued pigs, according to Codrington 1891:80) for advancing in rank. One high-ranking *Suque* member on Maevo Island

claimed to have sacrificed 7,500 pigs and to have eaten 100 men in his career (Speiser 1996:374).

Owing to the exorbitant costs of the higher grades, there was a great amount of lending and borrowing, often resulting in destitution and poverty for those who miscalculated or experienced unexpected misfortunes (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:349–50). It is worth repeating that the upshot of this system was that a *Suqe* candidate “destroyed all his material assets ... He now has debts on all sides, but his rank very soon allows him to make good his material losses” (Speiser 1996:369). Considerable advance planning and investing was required to enter higher ranks, including the planting of especially large yam gardens to supply food for the required feasts (Speiser 1996:353).

For the *Nimangki* society on Malekula, Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:293–5, 301, 330, 334–6, 371, 375) reported that a sponsor had to be found for membership in every grade and a payment of six pigs was given to them. They also reported that “piles of food” were given by the candidate, presumably for the feasts that included all the members of the grade that a candidate was entering as well as members of higher grades to whom the candidate supplied a pig. The cost of the first grade was four tusked pigs provided by the father, at which time the candidate’s ears were pierced. The third grade involved the payment of five or six pigs, some of which helped to pay for the carving of a statue. The tenth grade required thirteen tusked pigs. Pig tusk bracelets were part of the cost of higher grade initiations, together with setting up stone circles, carving posts, erecting and carving stone monoliths, and planting special bushes or trees.

For the *Nalawan* Society, the initiation fee paid to the “introducer” or sponsor for the first grade was thirteen pigs (valued at £23 *c.* 1926), with a pig given by the “introducer” to the candidate valued at £12 as “change.” An additional five pigs were required to pay for paraphernalia obtained as part of the grade (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:391, 394–5). Higher grade initiations involved spending one year secluded in the *amel*, or clubhouse (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:421–2).

### **Hierarchies**

The *Suqe* and all secret societies in the New Hebrides were organized as hierarchies (Speiser 1996:342). The number of major grades or ranks in *Suqe* groups varied from four to eighteen, with some that could be subdivided (Speiser 1996:357). The *Nimangki* Society on Melakula was reported to have had thirty-two successive grades with ultimate authority vested in the highest grades (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:273). Only the most gifted individuals could attain the highest ranks (Speiser 1996:356). Low-ranking members showed deference to those of high rank by approaching them on their knees, not addressing them directly, not watching them eat, and providing gifts to them (Speiser 1996:362). The *Nalawan* Society consisted of twenty-three grades,

sometimes viewed as affiliated clubs (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:387). The *Nelan* Society (a cognate of the *Nimangki Tlel*) had five grades (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:456).

In New Guinea, important big men with significant influence at the confederacy level organized and led *Ganekhe* groups (Hampton 1999:137), but beyond this, little information on hierarchies is available.

In the Bismarks, the six highest ranking *Dukduk* members used tricks and proclaimed beliefs to govern lower ranking members as well as others in the communities (Webster 1932:109).

### Community Benefits or Threats

High-ranking *Suque* men were feared in the New Hebrides thanks to their possession of powerful *mana* and magic as well as their corporeal ability to terrorize people with impunity. They could impose powerful taboos with the support of their *Suque* group and did not hesitate to act despotically by invoking their magical powers (Speiser 1996:249,315–16). Some divinities were supposed to be dangerous if humans came into contact with them (Speiser 1996:322), hence the need for knowledgeable *Suque* members in the communities. Presumably, these were the spirits embodied by the “terror masks” used to terrorize novices, women, and children in public performances (Allen 1967:93–4; Speiser 1996:337–8). Sounds said to be the voices of spirits (e.g., ghosts and ogresses that eat men; Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:388) were used to terrify spectators (Speiser 1996:341–2). On “Mota Lava and Ureparapara the whole island is terrorized by the *suque* before a man is promoted to a higher grade,” according to Coombe (1911; cited by Speiser 1996:364). Codrington (1891:72) also mentioned that the property of the uninitiated was often plundered and they were beaten during the mysteries. All order was upset. People encountered on paths during the mysteries could be beaten and there was

great licence in carrying off all they want, robbing gardens and stripping fruit-trees for their feast and then any one will suffer who has spoken or acted without due respect to the society. The ghosts in their disguise will rush into the villages, chasing the terrified women and children, and beating any whom they can catch.

(Codrington 1891:83)

Sometimes houses were even pulled to pieces. Members of the *Nimbe’ei* Society on Malekula Island exerted their influence by threatening to kill and eat those who injured their members. Such injuries were generally portrayed by the societies as contrary to the public good (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:229). On the other hand, some societies “do not terrify or beat, but come out to show their finery and dance” (Codrington 1891:83), apparently trying to impress the community with their powerful *mana* for success.



Thus, aside from holding dances, feasts, and public dramas (see “Public Displays of Power and Wealth”), it seems that New Hebridean secret societies provided few “carrots” or benefits for uninitiated community members. Rather, they seem to have relied primarily on the “stick” of intimidation and terror to impose their wills on communities.

In the Bismarks, one possible benefit of the *Dukduk* Society may have been that it established a kind of “international law-society” with rules and laws (Webster 1932:110). However, these could have been all of a self-serving nature for the society members rather than of an altruistic or community-serving nature.

The Stone Fertility Cult of the Mbowamb in New Guinea proffered fertility, health, and wealth for its communities through its rituals (Allen 1967:44). Similarly, the *Ganekhe* and Sun Cult groups of the Dani claimed to be able to provide good health, good weather, good crops, many pigs, fertility, success against enemies, and personal benefits (Hampton 1999:161,185,209–10). However, these benefits could only be achieved by dealing with powerful spirit forces, including malevolent spirits (156). This was supposedly achieved by *Ganekhe* groups by enlisting the help of powerful ancestral spirits embodied in the sacred *Ganekhe* stones kept in the secret sacred compounds or by dealing directly with the sun (also embodied in a stone; 212), which was viewed as powerful, beneficial, and necessary for success (156). Thus, New Guinea secret societies appear to have relied more on “carrot” benefits than on intimidation to obtain support from their communities.

### Public Displays of Power and Wealth

As we have just seen, in the New Hebrides and Banks Islands, secret societies engaged in terrifying public destructive activities (of property) and physical aggression to terrorize women, children, and the uninitiated (Allen 1967:93–4; Speiser 1996:337). The *Qat* and *Tamate* secret societies put on public masked performances that displayed the dangerous spirits that the societies dealt with (Speiser 1996:337). The *Nimangki* Society led processions of visitors and members with candidates playing gongs and killing pigs. Women were in the audience for some parts of the rituals at the dance ground (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:292,297). The *Qat* Society performed difficult dances in the village center under the full moon and sported very high masks (Codrington 1891:86). Masked performers in the *Nalawan* ceremonies represented ghosts (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:434). There were even public performances put on by the *Nevinbur* society, the most sacred of all the secret societies (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:463,466). The public dances with masks and feathers were theatrical in nature and were rehearsed for weeks or months before the performances (Speiser 1996:381). Women were not allowed on the dance grounds but could dance on the peripheries. Various instruments (bullroarers,

trumpets, vibrating fans) were also used to make unusual sounds said to be the voices of spirits (e.g., ghosts and ogresses that eat men; Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:388) and were used to terrify spectators (Speiser 1996:341–2).

The high-ranking men of the Mbowamb group in New Guinea form a “closed cult community” that held major rites every six to eight years, with public sacrifices and feasts on all the clan dance grounds that all ages and sexes attended (Allen 1967:43).

### **Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

From accounts of the destruction of property, the use of masks and especially “terror masks,” and terrorizing women and children in the New Hebrides (Allen 1967:93–4; Speiser 1996:337–8), it would seem that *Suqe* or other secret society members were probably engaging in sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) or possession states. They appeared to have run amok in blind fury when acting out roles of dangerous spirits. Long periods of fasting, sexual abstinence, and seclusion in the clubhouses or in “mysterious seclusion” locations in the bush (around one to five months; Codrington 1891:87,90,93; Speiser 1996:337–8,364) would also be expected to produce some ecstatic experiences or at least altered states of consciousness.

Candidates for the higher grades of the *Nalawan* Society stayed in seclusion for a year observing food taboos and fasting before taking their grades, although other societies had periods of seclusion of only three to four months (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:421–2,423,448). In addition to fasting, part of the initiations into a number of societies included painful hazing-like ordeals like thrashing with nettles, being pummeled or trampled, forcing candidates to hold embers or placing burning branches on their backs, eating or drinking on the ground, having snakes and scorpions thrown on them, eating food mixed with ashes or dung, and being covered with dung (Codrington 1891:88–90; Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:433,448,452,457). They also heard terrifying sounds and were shown terrifying scenes such as men without heads. The women’s secret society, the *Lapas*, also involved knocking out two incisor teeth (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:480–1).

Initiates in the *Dukduk* Society of the Bismarks were repeatedly flogged to the point of drawing blood as part of a ritual “killing” and rebirth (Webster 1932:113). This undoubtedly induced altered states of consciousness.

### **Enforcement**

Anyone indulging in the unauthorized use of the badges of secret societies (including special tattoos, shells, drums, tusks, clothes, beaded pieces, shells, plant leaves, or flowers) in the New Hebrides faced severe punishments such as beatings and fines. Trespassing into tabooed areas resulted in fines or death (Codrington 1891:76; Speiser 1996:337). Even inside the clubhouses, if lower

ranking members intruded into higher ranking areas, they would reportedly be killed (Codrington 1891:105,115). Taboos imposed by the societies, including a taboo on having fires during certain events, resulted in pig fines for transgressions (Codrington 1891:84). In the Banks Islands, Allen (1967:94) also noted that there were strong prohibitions against any women or children seeing initiations or coming close to the secret lodges. Codrington (1891:85fn) reported the seizure and initiation of a boy peeking in on a *Qat* Society initiation, while women who heard society songs during initiations were carried off and ravished (Codrington 1891:87). It is interesting that secret societies here and in other culture areas (see Chapters 2 and 3) had the option of killing transgressors or initiating them, undoubtedly depending on the wealth and the desirability or undesirability of the offender for membership.

On Malekula, Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:229,432,439–40,476) reported that women died if they saw masks being made, while the *Nimbe'ei* Society members reportedly killed and ate those who injured any society members. Performers in other societies who let their masks fall during performances were killed. If anyone stepped over a fallen mask, they were killed and eaten. Absolute quiet was mandatory for performances of the *Nevinbur* Society (one of the most sacred of all societies) and those who broke this rule were punished by death. One account involved a father killing his son for flippancy toward the *Nevinbur* after which the son was eaten by members (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:468).

Secret societies such as the *Nimangki Tlel* claimed exclusive use of certain plants, animals, birds, and fish. Any uninitiated individuals found possessing, eating, or using those items were punished with fines, destruction of their property, or death (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:440–5). Codrington (1891:83) added that “any one will suffer who has spoken or acted without due respect to the society. The ghosts in their disguise will rush into the villages, chasing the terrified women and children, and beating any whom they can catch.”

Members sometimes pulled houses apart in order to force compliance with their will (Codrington 1891:83fn). Uninitiated people who met *Qat* Society members carrying costume materials were either killed or fined a pig, and formerly, elder members of the *Qat* Society shot arrows at dance performers who made errors (Codrington 1891:90,85).

Women were killed by the *Dukduk* Society for viewing masked performers, and thus, women generally stayed in their houses during ceremonies. Anyone who dared to touch a masked person was killed (Webster 1932:111–12). The society had the power to kill with impunity and to fine any transgressors (Webster 1932:114).

In New Guinea, the Mendi beat up and fined any intruders into their special cult houses located in secret locations (Allen 1967:45). Allen also noted

that there were strong prohibitions against any women or children seeing initiations or coming close to the secret lodges (1967:94).

### **Human Sacrifices and Cannibalism**

Speiser (1996:326,370,373–4) thought that before Europeans arrived, the main sacrifices in the *Suqe* groups were probably humans, especially war captives, instead of pigs. One *Suqe* member on Maevo Island claimed to have eaten a hundred men during his career (Speiser 1996:374). Other graphic accounts of killing and eating people have been presented in the section on “Enforcement.”

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

Throughout Melanesia, special stones appear to have been viewed as the abode of powerful spirits and thus were seen as possessing unusual *mana*, being used as amulets or as vehicles for contacting the dead or other spirits (Codrington 1891:140,143,175,181–5). In Malekula, special stones in general, whether small or large, and stone images in particular, were associated with high grades in the *Nimangki* and other secret societies (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:273–4,315). Statues (*temes*) of wood or stone were treated as the home of spirits of the deceased members of specific grades in the society, including the original founder of the grade, and the statues possessed the special powers of each grade (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:280–1). Some of the higher ranking wooden statues were set up either to the side of the *amel* (clubhouse), behind it, or between the *amel* and wood gongs, and for certain grades, statues were encircled by stones (309–10,314,319–20,322,324). Members in the highest grades of the *Namangki* and other secret societies erected stone menhir statues having phallic forms near or behind the *amel*, some of which were so powerful that they could supposedly kill those not properly prepared (274,299,336). These were about 5 feet tall and were sometimes accompanied by six or seven other menhirs that were 2–3 feet tall, often surrounded by a stone circle reminiscent of Late Jomon phallic stones and circles. Higher grades also erected sculpted poles between the wood gongs, with the skulls of former grade members attached to the tops (330).

Amulets were most often stones in the New Hebrides, especially attractive or unusual stones, but stones of many sizes from pebbles to monoliths could contain powerful *mana* (Speiser 1996:309–10,314). In addition, high-ranking *Suqe* men were the only ones to wear a variety of items including boar tusk bracelets, turtle shell armlets, special headbands or leg bands, other special clothing, quartz nose plugs, special ear ornaments, certain plant leaves and flowers, shell rings, and to have certain tattoo designs or use certain decorative motifs (generally geometric patterns). Certain types of shells and feathers,

special penis sheaths, armbands with shell beads, and tusk nose inserts were all considered as badges of *Suque*, *Nimangki*, or *Nalawan* ranks which had to be purchased as part of that rank. In addition, the use of eating knives, drums, and shell trumpets was restricted (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:284–6,309,403,412,416–21; Speiser 1996:157–8,159,167–8,172,360). At feasts, “in order to denote his rank clearly, he dons as armlets the tusks of all the pigs he has himself sacrificed” (Speiser 1996:283). Hawk feathers worn in the hair, often used in the Hawk dance, featured prominently in many of the *Nimangki* grade initiations (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:310,315,319,322,324).

Instruments said to be the voices of spirits were used for terrifying non-initiates of secret societies in the New Hebrides; they included bullroarers (the voice of an ogre that eats men), shell trumpets, wood cylinders or “trombes” (the voice of ghosts), mouth reeds, and vibrating palm fans (Codrington 1891:80; Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:297,309,331,388–9,391,432–3,454; Speiser 1996:341–2). “Trombe” wood cylinders were 2–6 feet long, were kept in the *amel*, and three were played together accompanied by the playing of wood gongs and singing. Large shell conch trumpets were signs of wealth and were blown during initiation processions or other ceremonies (Speiser 1996:368,377). A standard part of most initiation ceremonies in Malekula was the breaking of a conch shell over the head of a pig that was to be sacrificed (e.g. Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:331). Other instruments included drums, gongs (of wood), rattles (with nuts or snails inside), flutes of bamboo, pan pipes, and jaw harps (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:398–9; Speiser 1996:377–9).

The tall drums, or “gongs” (in photos, 14–20 feet high and around a yard in diameter), were set up in or at the sides of dancing grounds (see Figs. 7.3, 7.5, and 7.8). They could be plain, carved with stylized designs, or carved to represent ancestors, essentially forming hollow ancestor statues (Speiser 1996:345,348). The size and degree of carving displayed the rank of the individual or *Suque* group owner. The higher grades of the *Nalawan* Society erected new gongs (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:409).

Masks, especially “terror masks,” with full costumes were used in the New Hebrides to represent spirits (Speiser 1996:338). Masks were generally associated with the use of drums and statues (Speiser 1996:338) and were especially sacred and mysterious items, but in some areas only used in the *Nalawan* Society (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:286,403,426,439). In the highly sacred *Nevinbur* Society, old effigies were destroyed in ceremonies of initiates’ resurrection, and hundreds of new effigies were manufactured, with each member taking possession of three to nine of them (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:465–7).

There were large collections of animal and human bones in *Suque* clubhouses, and presumably other secret society cult houses, especially mandibles. Bones of high-ranking men were thought to confer especially powerful *mana* and were often kept in clubhouses (Speiser 1996:343). The skulls of previous

grade members were frequently placed on temporary structures or poles for initiations (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:408,417) or were modeled and kept on display in the *amel* as life-like presences (see “Treatment of the Dead”). Pig mandibles from advancement ceremonies were kept by the candidates (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:368). In addition, Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:307,324,329,331,403,416,420–4) refer numerous times to spears and bows and arrows being used in *Namangki* and *Nalawan* rituals, and being brought from the *amel*. Thus, one might expect arrow and spear points to occur in clubhouses as well asdebitage from their manufacture.

In New Guinea, the *Ganekhe* secret cult houses of the Dani held sacred bundles which included special sacred stones but could also include human mandibles, fossils, other bones, and quartz crystals (Hampton 1999:153,185–7). Flutes were used in secret societies as well as in tribal initiations to represent the voices of supernatural spirits (Allen 1967:31,38,58). In general, descent groups owned secret objects in the Sepik area of New Guinea, including flutes and bullroarers (Allen 1967:69).

### Structures and Activity Areas

The location of *Suque* “clubhouses” in the New Hebrides varied from being in the center of the villages or house clusters to being 100–500 or more meters away from houses. On Pentecost, Ambrym, and Aoba Islands, the clubhouse and dance grounds were “some distance” or “far removed from the dwellings” or villages (Speiser 1996:95,345–6). Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:24,274) provided some detailed maps of Malekulan villages showing the division of the villages into a profane residential area and a sacred area comprising a clubhouse, or *amel*, and a dancing ground with wooden “gongs,” with the sacred and secular areas being separated by a fence (see Fig. 7.2). From their subsequent descriptions, it appeared that other secret societies (*Nevinbur* and *Nalawan*) used the same dancing ground, gongs, and clubhouse for their more public ceremonies (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:24404,406,408,417–22,462–3,466).

The *Tamate* Society clubhouses were private structures hidden in the bush “near” every large village or in a secluded place with tall trees. They contained works of art as well as cooking paraphernalia (Codrington 1891: 72,77; Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:271; Allen 1967:6). The sacred places where *Nimangki Tlel* Societies’ rituals were performed were “generally hidden away near the summit of a hill, or at the head of a ravine, or in the woods” (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:437). These were “not permanently in use but only occupied, it seems, when novices were being initiated,” which is when other members resided there (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:437). The structure for the women’s secret society, the *Lapas*, was similarly “far away in the bush,” and a male and a female statue were placed there that had the potential to harm or kill uninitiated or lower ranked individuals (474). There was also

a small structure for entrants to new grades (483–6). Ritual structures (*salago*) of other secret societies were located in secret meeting places in forest glades and used by members to eat meals and store the masks used in public performances (Speiser 1996:337,342). Candidates spent their long periods of fasting and “mysterious seclusion” in bush clearings (Speiser 1996:364) or in small structures in tabooed locations (Codrington 1891:92). The Qat Society had no permanent clubhouse, but for initiations erected “an enclosure in a retired place ... made by a fence of reeds, the two ends of which overlap to make an entrance ... through which it is impossible to look” (Codrington 1891:84). Lesser societies had no lodges but used the “*sara*” which was not defined (Codrington 1891:75,82).

The areas around cult lodges were avoided by women and uninitiated people, even after they became derelict. Sacred objects, especially masks and screens, were made in the lodges (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:438) so that one could expect manufacturing as well as eating and feasting debris to be associated with these ritual structures. In some societies, there were three bush structures: a house for the master of the rituals, a lesser house for other initiates, and a shed for candidates (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:448–51).

High-ranking *Suque* members’ houses were similar in construction to *Suque* clubhouses in terms of carved posts, foundation platforms with stone facings, or other features, although they were usually somewhat shorter in dimensions (Speiser 1996:110–11,344,Plate 17). Houses of high-ranking men were generally located either close to the clubhouse (within 50 meters) or “at some distance” from villages (Speiser 1996:91–2, 94–6,109,111,Plates 10–11).

Construction was also quite variable, although in general most clubhouses were considerably larger than normal houses (on Ambrym Island the largest was 7 by 4 meters; on Vao Island, one example was 25 by 7 meters and 5 meters high; on Venua Lava Island, one example was 35 meters long; Speiser 1996:105,107,111). Their size was determined by the highest ranking member of the *Suque* who built the structure or had it built (Speiser 1996:111,113). Clubhouses were the property of the *Suque* group. Some clubhouses were built on platform bases a meter in height and faced with large blocks of stone (see Fig. 7.4). Others were built on leveled ground and associated with other stone structures (Fig. 7.9) and earthworks (Speiser 1996:94). They were sometimes paved, and associated with stone “walls” for dancing or stone “structures,” or built on stone bases near walled cemeteries with tall monoliths (Fig. 7.9) as on Gaua and Maevo Islands (Speiser 1996:96,110–11,347,Plates 15,89). The main posts of clubhouses were often large and carved, especially as birds (Fig. 7.10); however, others were relatively plain (Fig. 7.11). On Vao Island, “huge slabs of coral” were set up a few meters beyond the ends of the clubhouses (see Fig. 7.3) (Speiser 1996:105,Plates 16,17). Statues representing the highest grade members or ranks were set up on the front wall of clubhouses, as well





7.9 A clubhouse and surrounding stone walls on Gaua Island. The clubhouse appears to be built on a stone platform. The stone walls were used as dancing platforms or sacrificial platforms for pigs (Speiser 1923:Plate 89.1).



7.10 The inside of the clubhouse on Venua Lava Island shown in Fig. 7.4. The stone slabs demarcate the hearth areas of higher grades in the secret society. Note the carved post in the foreground. While some posts were plain, others were carved with animals appropriate to the grades of sections of the clubhouses (Speiser 1923:Plate 18.5).



7.11 The interiors of two comparatively simple clubhouses on Espiritu Santo Island (Speiser 1923:Plate 13.7,8). Note the separate cooking hearths for different ranks, features not found in ritual structures used in other areas such as California (compare Fig. 3.7).

as inside (Speiser 1996:350,352). Carved stone images were erected in the bush behind the *Nimangki* clubhouses on Malekula by the highest grades and were considered particularly sacred (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:274; see “Paraphernalia”). For other grades, monoliths or poles were set up near the clubhouse in stone circles or sometimes forming lines of six stones 2–5 feet high or in longer lines (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:334–6,371,374). Statues of the “really secret societies seem actually to have been invariably obscene” (Speiser 1996:353). Skulls and bones of deceased high-ranking members were often housed in or around clubhouses (Speiser 1996:343; see also “Treatment of the Dead”). Statues with modeled skulls of men of very high rank were placed on the inside partition walls of clubhouses (see Fig. 7.6) or on inside posts (Speiser 1996:350).

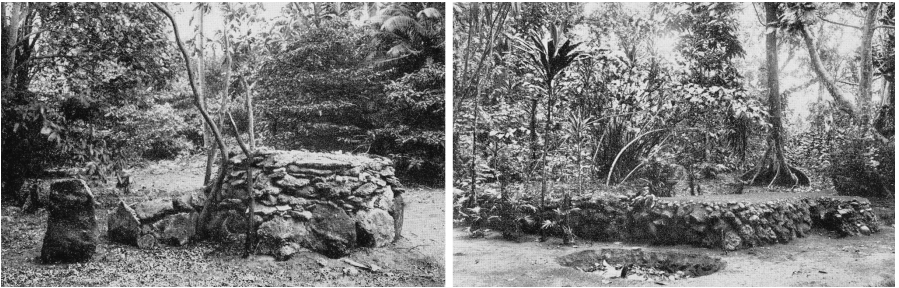
The interiors of clubhouses that were divided by a walled partition (see Fig. 7.6) used the back area for the burial of important *Suque* members (Speiser 1996:104, Plates 80,86). There were large collections of animal and human bones (especially mandibles) in *Suque* clubhouses, and presumably other secret society cult houses. Statues of ancestral members sometimes were placed under the gables (Speiser 1996:105).

### *Dancing Grounds*

Clubhouses were also almost always adjacent to large dancing grounds (see Figs. 7.3 and 7.5), typically about 80–100 by 30–60 meters, often with tall wood drums or “gongs” in the center or along one edge (Speiser 1996:94,345–6, Plates 87,97,100,101,104,105). Drums were owned by the *Suque* (Speiser 1996:348). In some places, stone monoliths, sacrificial tables, stone benches, and/or ancestral houses lined one edge of the dancing grounds, forming almost continuous stone walls (Figs. 7.12 and 7.13). Sometimes the paths leading to the dancing grounds resembled small versions of Carnac according to the ethnographers (Speiser 1996: 106,346–8, 374, Plates 1,87,88,104). In particular, on Vao Island, there were many monoliths in long avenues, representing



7.12 Two dolmen-like stone tables associated with a dancing ground on Epi Island. They were used for sacrificing pigs. Note the statues behind them (Speiser 1923:Plate 104.4).



7.13 Two stone platforms for sacrificing pigs on Ambrym Island (left) and Aoba Island (right). The standing stone at far left commemorated an earlier pig sacrifice (Speiser 1923:Plate 87.1,2).

the sacrifice of thousands of pigs, each stone representing one sacrificed pig (or Speiser suggests one person or an enemy killed), depending on monolith sizes (Speiser 1996:97,346,374). These stone avenues, one containing 372 stones, were also reported on Malekula, with a pig attached to each stone during initiations (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:348–9). Stone monuments were always associated with people of high rank in the *Nimangki* Society of Malekula (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:273).

On the islands east of Malekula, small houses for ancestors (see Fig. 7.8) were located on the periphery of dance grounds (Speiser 1996:347, Plates 1,86,88). Stone tables (“dolmens”), platforms, or walls about 50 cm high (Fig. 7.12) were also used for hosts to stand and dance upon as well as for sacrificing pigs

(Speiser 1996:345, Plates 79, 87, 88, 97, 104). Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:381) also referred to “stone towers” near the *amel* used for killing pigs. On Pentecost Island, such sacrificial tables were the height of a man (Speiser 1996:365). For the highest *Namangki* ranks, platforms were created using killed pigs as the building materials, with twenty pigs to a level (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:357). Racks for displaying numerous pig mandibles from feasts were common features either inside or outside clubhouses or around the dance grounds (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:105–6, 346). At least on Efate Island, dancing grounds were artificially leveled (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:346).

Other secret societies such as the *Nimangki Tlel* had dancing grounds used for large public performances just outside their “*loghor*” or ritual lodges (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:453). The *Nelan* Society (a cognate of the *Nimangki Tlel*) suspended a 30-foot long sacred screen, 30 feet above the ground, and platforms were built for killing pigs in the surrounding trees, their height being a function of the grade candidates were applying for (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:458).

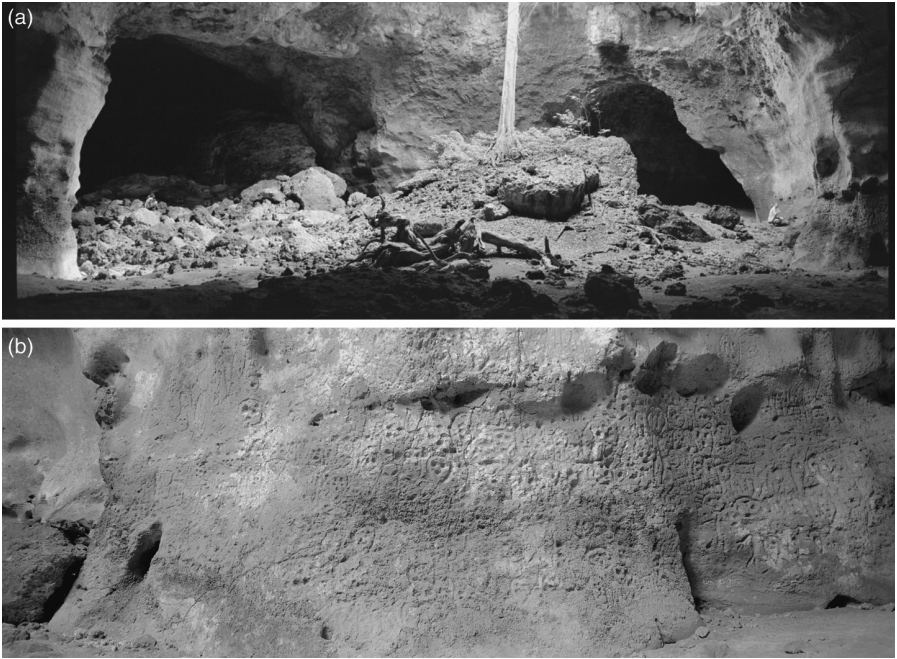
There were also high, pointed, “little edifices” associated with dancing grounds. These were built on square stone platforms with open fronts and a hearth with a statue emblematic of the rank of the occupants. These structures were used as private eating places for men of especially high *Suque* rank (Codrington 1891:101; Speiser 1996:354).

Dancing grounds in the Hawaiian Islands were a “long way from the individual settlements and have to serve a large number of them” (Speiser 1996:91–2, 94–6, 109, 111).

In New Guinea, the sacred fertility stones of the Mbowamb were kept in secret groves near the dancing grounds (Allen 1967:44), while those of the Mendi were kept in concealed structures in scrub lands (Allen 1967:45). Similarly, the secret sacred compounds of the Dani were isolated and scattered over the landscape, with one for “every big man with significant influence at the confederacy level” (Hampton 1999:137, 146). Several examples were forty-five minutes’ walk from villages of residents (Hampton 1999:137, 147). These compounds were literal “ghost towns” most of the time except for ritual events, although some had a full-time custodian with his family. These compounds resembled normal residential compounds except that there were no domestic material items other than in the custodian’s house. One structure was devoted to the keeping of the sacred and powerful *Ganekhe* stones together with displays of arrow war bundles and numerous pig mandibles that represented the number of rituals held and the magnitude of influence of the cult leader (Hampton 1999:138, 142, 144–5). One structure also served as a cook house for pig feasts during rituals.

A special variant of such sacred structures was the Sun Houses that served as regional centers for the Sun Cult (Hampton 1999:206). The Sun compounds





7.14 Pictographs in Yalo Cave on Melakula Island (Courtesy of Chris Ballard and the Vanuatu National Cultural Council). Note the scale of the person crouching in the cave at right in the upper photograph.

were described as similar to the above-mentioned secret sacred compounds including a custodian, although the Sun House was described as a small and essentially empty building (147,206). There were three Sun Houses about an hour's walk from each other in a cult area of more than 60 by 20 kilometers, plus five "branch" Sun Houses (206,208,209).

### *Caves*

Speiser (1996:114) noted that the New Hebrides natives dreaded caves, especially deep dark ones. Although no one has reported the use of caves in any rituals, subsequent work has established that highly decorated caves on Malekula (e.g., Yalo and Apialo Caves (Fig. 7.14), about 10 kilometers from the nearest villages) were at the heart of people's spiritual existence, which was largely focused on grade-taking ceremonies (Wilson et al. 2000), presumably in secret societies. Access to the caves was strictly controlled, as well as certain areas in the caves being exclusively used by chiefs while other areas were used for dancing. Inside there were thousands of petroglyphs and handprints (purported to have been made by spirits including ancestral spirits), as well as a rough rock wall and stone arrangements. Those who entered the caves could be supernaturally empowered, although such details were kept secret (Wilson et al. 2000). As in New Guinea, these central caves, and their spirits, were connected to an

entire network of spiritually linked caves in the region. Thus, it seems likely that these caves and caves in their associated networks were used for regional secret society rituals.

In New Guinea, Goldman (1979) documented the central importance of a cave at Kelote for the Huli and surrounding ethnic groups. His description of a very few (about thirteen) “certain men who held specialized spells invoked this deity to promote land and general fertility” corresponds with other secret society organizations together with their claims to benefit their communities. It is interesting that this cave spirit traveled along spirit tracks in the region that linked up to other caves which were similarly used for rituals. For the Dani, all caves were sacred places of emergence for life, seen and unseen, and entry was prohibited to the uninitiated. They served as meeting places for men to discuss supernatural secrets and to store ritual paraphernalia, including mummies or skeletons. Big men often had private ritual caves (Hampton 1999:49).

### **Treatment of the Dead**

As previously noted, high-ranking *Suque* men were considered to have great *mana* in both life and death. Their remains, therefore, generally received special treatment after they died. It is worth re-emphasizing that they were sometimes buried in a back partition of the *Suque* clubhouse and that their skulls could be modeled with a plastic compound (with shells used for eyes, and sometimes incorporating boar tusks) and set on wooden body frames arranged along the partition wall (see Figs. 7.6–7.7), e.g., in South Malekula, Banks, and Ambrym Islands (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:546; Speiser 1996:104,274–5,283,286,344,349–350, Plates 80–84, 102). Similarly, the main spirit that presided over the *Nevinbur* rituals (the most sacred of all organizations and “a true secret society”) was the modeled skull of a former member (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:461–2).

Some groups on Malekula buried the skulls of high-ranking *Suque* men separately (Speiser 1996:319). On Maevo Island, the clubhouse and dancing ground were adjacent to a walled cemetery with tall monoliths (Fig. 7.15), presumably for important *Suque* members (Speiser 1996:96). The highest *Suque* members on Pentecost Island had special burials in the “village-place with stones set up” (Speiser 1996:276). On Gaua Island, high-ranking *Suque* men were buried in secret or under a large stone, and on Maevo Island, they were buried under monoliths (Speiser 1996:277,347). This was apparently done in order to prevent people from digging up the bodies so as to retrieve bones with which they hoped to acquire the *mana* of the great men (Codrington 1891:267,280). Alternatively, in some places, high-ranking *Suque* members were buried in a special hut fifteen minutes’ walk away from the clubhouse or settlement through dense bush. Other people were buried in their own houses (Speiser 1996:273).



7.15 A menhir-like standing stone at a grave on Maevo Island. The grave is walled and behind the standing stone (Speiser 1923:Plate 80.6).

On Santo Island, high-ranking *Suque* men or their secondarily deposited bones were buried near the clubhouse within a ring of stones together with their ritual paraphernalia such as shell trumpets. Alternatively, their skulls were placed around the periphery of the dance ground (Speiser 1996:274). Codrington (1891:267,280) also recorded the burial of great men by the side of the clubhouse in the Banks Islands. On Aoba and some other islands, high-ranking individuals in the *Suque* were buried in mounds within a stone wall 2–5 meters in diameter and up to 1.5 meters high (Speiser 1996:277,347). On Vao and North Malekula Islands, high-ranking men's skulls were placed under stone altars or in ancestral houses (see Fig. 7.8), or under large stone or coral slabs in or around the dancing grounds. Postcranial skeletons were placed in graves surrounded by a coral wall (Speiser 1996:275,345). On Mota Island, high-ranking *Suque* members were buried with their rank insignia including necklaces, armlets, pig tusks, and food, and stone altars in dancing grounds were usually monumental graves (Speiser 1996:278,346).

On the islands east of Malekula, skulls were reportedly placed beneath the basal stones of ancestral houses, presumably of the ancestor being commemorated (Speiser 1996:348). Ancestor houses were erected for the skull of each man of



high grade (Speiser 1996:351), and their long bones were sometimes placed over the door lintel of clubhouses (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:533); other bones were placed in sacred grounds. Rituals of the most sacred *Nimangki* secret societies began with the exhuming of the skull and long bones of a high-ranking member which were then placed in a stone slab “dolmen” about a foot high (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:447,707), a practice that seems reminiscent of the opening of burials and retrieval of skulls at the Anatolian Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük (Hodder 2010b; Hodder and Pels 2010).

In general, “double burials” (presumably a mistranslation of secondary burials) were only carried out for the deceased members of high rank, as were boat burials (Speiser 1996:280–1). Even though there were no secret societies in the southern New Hebrides, it is interesting to note that dead commoners there were simply thrown into the sea and only elites were buried (Speiser 1996:280). The same burial pattern was also followed in some of the Solomon Islands (Codrington 1891:255,258). It is also interesting that in some places (e.g., Efate Island) fires were made on top of graves so that the souls could rise to the sun (Speiser 1996:276), a funeral practice sometimes documented archaeologically. Feasting accompanied the funerals and subsequent memorials to the dead. The size, length, and number of pigs killed at such feasts increased with the *Suque* rank of the dead, and mandibles from the pigs sacrificed were hung up in the clubhouse (Speiser 1996:287).

### **Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Organization**

Families and clans formed the basis of social organization in the New Hebrides, but Speiser (1996:302) perceptively and cogently observed that “Political groupings cannot develop out of these.” Clans, he argued, stood in the way of political organization, and thus other social organizations must cross-cut these social units in order to establish political structures. Speiser identified these other organizations as the *Suque* Societies in the northern New Hebrides. A *Suque* Society “unites men in the villages and the districts and it creates social ranks” (Speiser 1996:303,304). In the southern islands, political life was governed by hereditary chiefdom organizations. Speiser also duly noted the strong centrifugal forces that generally fragmented attempts to establish leadership outside these organizations. The *Dukduk* Society of the Bismarks was even referred to as an “international law-society” by Webster (1932:110), presumably because of its regional political role. The *Suque* generally cross-cut clan structures (Webster 1932:372) and thus “guests” invited to feasts to celebrate a candidate’s advancement brought food contributions from “far and wide” (Webster 1932:366), one would assume from allied or supporting *Suque* groups within a district.

Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:290,292,349) observed that *Nimangki* initiations into higher grades were attended by men from neighboring

hamlets and villages, but this only included higher ranking individuals, some of whom played key roles in the attendant transfers of payments. Each guest brought a pig to contribute to the initiation. Sponsors were from different villages than the candidate and only of higher rank, but attended with three or four assistants (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:290–2,404). In specific terms, “A man who aspires to the highest chieftainship by entrance to this grade, invites a party from two villages which are both distant from his own and from each other” (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:372). Since food for the highest ranked men could only be eaten by similar or higher ranked individuals, feasting foods were sent to men of high rank at some distance (Codrington 1891:107), illustrating the regional networks that characterized these societies. Similarly, the funerals of high-ranking members of the *Nalawan* and *Nimangki* Societies were attended by men of similar rank in the same societies from different villages who were given portions of meat to take away (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:404,528). Entry into the fifth grade of the *Nalawan* Society conferred the right to participate in ceremonies in other places wherever and whenever they were held (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:388).

The *Suque* also acted as a court for disputes that could not be otherwise resolved (presumably between kinship groups; Speiser 1996:306). The highest ranking member of a major society held influence over districts, although member villages were in constant flux due to the endemic competition and rivalries for the highest positions. Thus, political organizations were very unstable and usually fell apart as soon as a leader died (Speiser 1996:306). In this respect they resembled simple chiefdoms, like the ones on Futuna Island which Suzanne Villeneuve and I documented (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011).

In seemingly contradictory assertions to the above, Speiser (1996:299–301) also maintained that clans owned clubhouses (as well as land, tusked pigs, and women) and that within villages the clan “goes together with the *Suque* associations.” Clans competed with one another to show off at the great feasts and in ancestor worship, as well as vying with each other in owning tusked pigs, amulets, and supporting men with high ranks (Speiser 1996:300). Speiser (1996:372) speculated that originally members of each *Suque* group were from one clan.

The clubhouse of the most important *Suque* group in the New Hebrides served as the center of a “district community” comprising dispersed households within a geographical unit such as a valley or coastal strip (Speiser 1996:98). Recognition of members and their ranks extended to “all the surrounding settlements and islands” (Webster 1932:130, citing H. Meade 1870).

Among the Dani in New Guinea, there were large rituals for *Ganekhe* groups that included people from a broad geographical area, essentially representing big men confederacies (Hampton 1999:137,139). Sun Houses were also

regional centers for the Sun Cult, with three Sun Houses and five branch Sun Houses in an area larger than 60 by 20 kilometers, including the entire Grand Valley and the Western Dani area (206,208,209). Rituals included big men from major alliances (209–10). There is some confusion as to the extent to which *Ganekhe* groups cross-cut kinship groups. Hampton (1999:125,161) stated that members of individual groups “primarily” were from a given patrilineage which he identified as similar to sib members who recognized a common ancestor (102), perhaps not unlike clan members. However, he also cited Koch (1967:117; Hampton 1999:128), who maintained that members were from multiple lineages. At least for the Sun Cult, he reported that leaders were from separate moieties or patrilineages and were big men including those from major alliances and from each moiety (Hampton 1999:209–10).

### **Power Animals and Regional Art Styles**

The posts in *Suque* clubhouses were carved to represent the animals associated with the various ranks within the organization. The most commonly featured animals were lizards (the lowest ranks), fish (mid-level ranks), and birds (the highest ranks). Tusked pigs were also considered powerful symbols of rank and wealth, and pig tusks were sometimes incorporated into carvings or even into the modeled skulls of high-ranking *Suque* members (Fig. 7.7), essentially creating thieranthropic images (Speiser 1996:353–4, Plate 81.11). Birds were especially important as decorative motifs on clubhouses, houses of high-ranking *Suque* members, and in dance costumes (Speiser 1996:370). For instance, older members of the *Nimangki* Society performed and instructed novices in the Hawk dance (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:309). Speiser (1996:373) discussed the pervasive “*Suque* art style,” noting that:

the symbols of the *Suque* are used on almost every utensil which is decorated in any way ... things figuring most prominently in the *Suque*, namely the ghosts of ancestors as human faces or human figures, the pig mandible or tusk alone, and also the bird and shark ... they are applied to all utensils in endless new variations ... They represent the mana which should pass into the utensil and indirectly into its owner.

Many of these motifs were often highly stylized. It may be worth considering that similar secret society regional organizations may have been behind many of the widespread art traditions of the past, especially those recognized as part of “interaction spheres,” such as the Natufian, Prepottery Neolithic A and B, Puebloan, Hopewellian, Upper Paleolithic, Chavín, or other interaction spheres (Caldwell 1964). Of special interest is the fact that Speiser (1996:373) noted a strong relationship in the New Hebrides between artistic development and secret society organizations, with art and embellishments essentially lacking in areas without secret societies.

### Number of Societies

Codrington (1891:75) reported that there were many local imitations of the major secret societies, about a hundred on Torres Island alone, with every man belonging to four or five of them. Large villages could have up to three or four clubhouses, depending on the number of high-ranking *Suque* people in the village (Allen 1967:104; Speiser 1996:93–4,372). In the *Nimangki Tlel* Societies on Melakula there were often several lodges near many villages, with strong rivalries between them that sometimes broke out into fights, and there were sometimes even two or more lodges for one society (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:437–8). Use of multiple ritual structures also occurred in the *Dukduk* Society in the Bismarks, with these small structures and all materials being burned after each use (Webster 1932:112,114).

Among the Dani in New Guinea, all men in principle belonged to one or another *Ganekhe* group. Since these groups typically had only between three and twenty-two members (Hampton 1999:127), there must have been multiple groups.

### Proportion of Population

In the Banks Islands, members of any given *Tamate* secret society constituted a small segment of the total adult male population (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:271; Allen 1967:6), although there were so many societies under the *Tamate* umbrella that almost all men belonged to four or five of them (Codrington 1891:75). Almost all adult males belonged to the *Suque* Society at the entry level, although higher ranks were much more exclusive (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:271). Few men did not enter a *Suque* group, and those who did not were generally poor, despised, and from maltreated families without friends (Speiser 1996:356).

In New Guinea, the *Ganekhe* groups of the Dani had only between three and twenty-two members (Hampton 1999:127); however, there seem to have been a number of such groups.

### Age

The sons of high-ranking *Suque* members often attained quite high ranks in the *Suque* even “while still children” as long as their fathers could pay the required costs (Codrington 1891:103; Speiser 1996:356). Boys were introduced to the *Nimangki* Society at about seven or eight years old when they had their ears pierced (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:47n2,243,286,353,388). Wealthy men paid pigs and shell or mat money to initiate their sons or even infants too young to dance or walk into the *Qat* Society or other societies (Codrington 1891:81fn,85–66,93) while full initiation into the *Dukduk* Society took about twenty years (Webster 1932:113).

## Sex

The great majority of ritual organizations were male associations. Speiser (1996:357) reported that where women formed their own *Suque* organizations, these were not held in high esteem by men who considered the highest women's *Suque* rank as equivalent to the lowest men's *Suque* rank. Larcom (1980:143) claimed that the women's *Nimangki* Society was really controlled by men via their control of pigs and the husband's or male kin's rank.

In a survey of ritual associations in Melanesia, Allen (1967:7–8) concluded that there were no organizations with both male and female members (although he later mentions two); however, there were a few all-female ritual organizations, mainly on Malekula Island. One of the women's secret societies, the *Lapas*, met in a structure “far away in the bush” in which there were male and female statues that had the potential to inflict harm or even kill people, like the stones set up for the *Nimangki* high grades (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:479). The structure also held a very powerful sacred headdress that could inflict harm on uninitiated people or those of lower grades. Candidates for entry into the women's secret society had to pay fees similar to those of men's organizations.

Some idea of the status of women in relation to most secret societies can be gleaned from the descriptions in the “Enforcement” and “Public Display” sections in which women were generally described as being terrorized.

Women were generally excluded from religious rituals according to Codrington (1891:127). Women hid when they heard spirit voices and were kept indoors during parts of high-rank *Nalawan* initiations (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:386, 417, 432–3). They were supposedly not allowed to see sacred masks. However, as in other areas like the American Northwest, women and non-initiates were allowed to see certain public performances, which seem to have featured some of the society masks of even the most sacred secret societies like the *Nevinbur* (463, 466). In addition, in some societies such as the *Nelan* (a cognate of the *Nimangki Tlel*), the wife of the master of the lodge was the only woman allowed into the lodge or to participate in the rites. She was also available to cohabit with all the society members (456–7). The wife of a high-ranking member of the *Nimangki* Society could also enter the clubhouse where the high-ranking members could have sex with her (456).

## Feasts

In addition to feasts given in the village square by the sponsor of a candidate to enter a *Suque* group, the candidate had to give a “great banquet” to everyone in the clubhouse after his fasting days and admission to the *Suque* (Codrington 1891:103–4, 107; Speiser 1996:363). Promotion to higher ranks required the giving of a large public feast with visitors from other villages. Speiser (1996:366)

also reported candidates giving a feast for “friends” after each promotion, but it is not clear if this is the same feast for admission, or an additional feast. In order to promote such feasts on Santo Island and attract people to the event, hosts (presumably who had strong influence) proclaimed the suspension of all feuds as well as some taboos, and encouraged sexual license for the duration of the feast, although disputes often surfaced after a few days (Speiser 1996:366). Deacon and Wedgewood (1934:454) reported large feasts in the *Nimangki Tlel* lodges at the culmination of initiations, presumably only for members. The *Tamate* Society (or equivalent on Banks Island) also held a great yam harvest feast associated with the dead (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:456fn).

Among the Dani in New Guinea, rituals at secret sacred and Sun compounds included pig feasts with major participants all bringing big pigs (Hampton 1999:139,209–10).

### Frequency

As with secret societies in many other areas (California, the Northwest Coast, the Great Lakes), it appears that the main reason for holding major ceremonies in Melanesian secret societies was the initiation of new members (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:463). Minor ceremonies may have been held more often, but these were not recorded. The frequency of initiations depended largely on the time it took to gather enough new candidates and resources for initiations, sometimes yearly, sometimes only once every five to ten years (Codrington 1891:92). For some societies like the *Nimangki Tlel*, ceremonies were only held after a member died and after a special yam garden had been planted and was ready for harvest, at which time new candidates were initiated (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:446). Lower grade candidates stayed secluded for three to four months; higher grade candidates were secluded for a year (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:421–2,450,455). Candidates for a number of different grades could all be admitted during the same ceremonials (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:424). In the *Nimangki* proper, initiations seem to have been the main catalyst for holding ceremonies.

In contrast to the multi-year interval that was usual for ceremonies in the New Hebrides, the *Dukduk* spirit in the Bismarks appeared six times a year in every town (Webster 1932:113).

In New Guinea, major public ritual feasts of the Mbowamb occurred every six to eight years (Allen 1967:43). Similarly, the major rituals of the Dani Sun Cult occurred every five years, bringing together all the big men from major alliances, although minor rituals occurred once a year or when needed by individuals for healing, crops, pigs, success in war, or personal matters (Hampton 1999:209–10). This may have been a fairly widespread pattern.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# CHIEFDOMS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

### INTRODUCTION TO CHIEFLY SECRET SOCIETIES

In the Azande area of East Africa, secret societies took on a special character, described as subterranean, subversive, and non-indigenous. They are usually considered to have derived from resistance movements against either powerful chiefs/kings or colonial powers (Evans-Pritchard 1937:511,514; Baxter and Butt 1953:91). The same is true of some other secret societies in other areas such as the *Lilwa* in the Congo (Nelson 1994:180) (see Fig. 8.1). Both Baxter and Evans-Pritchard considered secret societies to have been relatively recently introduced into the Azande area. However, in contrast to the above interpretations, Evans-Pritchard (1937:514,516) noted that some chiefs supported the secret societies in their areas and that formerly membership in these societies was not secret. In spite of the special circumstances of political resistance to colonial rule, there are a number of features of ritual societies in Central Africa that seem similar to secret societies in other areas where the traditions have more definite historical depth. Thus, it is not inconceivable that a form of secret society may have been part of traditional cultures in some areas of Central Africa. The secret supernatural knowledge of how to prepare potent medicines for various purposes and the restriction of that knowledge based on wealth were certainly hallmarks of secret societies elsewhere in the world, as was the voluntary membership (Evans-Pritchard 1937).





8.1 Map of the ethnic groups (in italics) in Africa mentioned in the text.

### *Dynamics and Origins*

Baxter and Butt (1953:91) and Evans-Pritchard (1937:511,514,519) documented the spread of specific secret societies into the Azande area from neighboring groups. Evans-Pritchard (1937:519) emphasized the constant introduction of new medicines and magical practices, initiations, and secret societies, resulting in little stability or permanence in the ritual landscape. Anyone with knowledge could start up their own lodge (Evans-Pritchard 1937:525), and all lodges were independent, although members of other lodges were recognized (524). “Often a closed association loses its popularity, its members join a new association with the attraction of novelty, and the old one remains only a memory” (519). This was also typical of secret societies in Melanesia, the American Great Plains, the American Northwest Coast, and

California. As in most other culture areas, the main secret society in Rwanda formed part of the native political structure.

### *Differences with Other Secret Societies*

Secret society ranks and roles among the Azande were independent of the traditional social structure (e.g., nobles had no automatic authority while women could have prominent roles; Evans-Prichard 1937:522; Baxter and Butt 1953:92). This feature differs from almost all other transegalitarian secret societies and may possibly be a result of the societies' political role in terms of resistance to colonial rule.

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives**

The *Kubwanda* secret society members in Rwanda explicitly held the goals of promoting the interests of members, bringing fortune to the rich, and performing rituals for curing (Meyer and Handzik 1916:194, 196–7). The motive for introducing new medicines was said to be material gain: “a man who brings a new Mani medicine from a foreign country is likely to make a little wealth while its novelty persists” (Evans-Pritchard 1937:519).

#### **Links to Political Power**

The *Mani* Society of the Azande had few if any links to political power (Evans-Pritchard 1937:522), whereas the *Kubwanda* Society in Rwanda had the head appointed by the king, and members included the king's assistants and bodyguards (Meyer and Handzik 1916:194). Similarly, the cult of *Ryangombe* in Rwanda played an important political role (Czekanowski 1917:237). Czekanowski even raised the possibility that the interlacustrine states might not exist without secret societies and expressed the opinion that rule by minorities very probably depended on secret societies (Czekanowski 1917:238).

#### **Sources of Wealth and Fees**

Novices were taught the magic and rituals of Azande secret societies only after fees had been paid and they were initiated (Baxter and Butt 1953:92). Members had to pay to acquire specific medicines and they became heads of the lodges through the purchase of medicines from other leaders together with a period of training. Members acquired wealth by using their medicines, by selling their medicine knowledge, and through initiation fees (Evans-Pritchard 1937:517–18). Taboos could also be lifted for a fee (Evans-Pritchard 1937:535).

To be initiated into the *Kubwanda* Society of Rwanda, individuals had to ask to be admitted and they had to have strong influence as well as pay costly

initiation fees including cattle, sheep, goats, and iron tools (Meyer and Handzik 1916:194, 199). Similarly, new initiates to the *Ryangombe* Cult needed sponsors and had to give swords, bells, and a great deal of beer and food to the society for their initiation, including a cow sacrifice. The surplus meat was divided among members. New initiates' tongues were pierced and only released when enough arm rings had been given to the society (Czekanowski 1917:240, 244–5, 248).

### *Tactics*

#### **Ideology**

The *Mani* secret society of the Azande claimed to make supernaturally potent “medicines” for curing as well as obtaining desired outcomes or objects (Evans-Pritchard 1937:524, 530–1). Similar claims probably characterized other secret societies in the region.

Azande medicines were supposedly only to be used for the good of people (particularly in obtaining wishes), although many people were skeptical of such claims, and actual practices seem to have blurred the distinction between what was good and what was nefarious (Evans-Pritchard 1937:522).

Members of the *Ryangombe* Cult in Rwanda thought themselves above profane laws (Czekanowski 1917:245).

#### **Benefits or Threats to Communities**

The *Mani* Society claimed to be able to provide curing as well as other benefits to members, including justice in disputes (Evans-Pritchard 1937:522).

#### **Ranks and Roles**

At a basic level, there was a leader, three minor officials who made medicines and acted as policing agents, senior members, givers of presents, and novices or lesser initiates. However, different medicines were graded differently, and the more medicines that a member had, the more power they had in the secret society (Evans-Pritchard 1937:518–19). There were also several different levels of initiation consisting of water initiates, blue bead initiates, and rubbing-board initiates, this last grade having the most powerful medicine (Evans-Pritchard 1937:532–5). Higher ranks of the *Ryangombe* Cult in Rwanda were more exclusive (Czekanowski 1917:245).

#### **Public Displays**

The *Kubwanda* Society in Rwanda held great feasts and public displays of power after novices were initiated (Meyer and Handzik 1916:195). Wealthy hosts of previous major rituals of the *Kubandwa* Society acted as impersonators of the main deity in the society's subsequent rituals (Meyer and Handzik 1916:199).

### **Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

Higher initiates in the *Ryangombe* Cult in Rwanda held tobacco root in their mouths until they collapsed (Czekanowski 1917:247). The initiates also had their tongues pierced until enough payment was given, after which there was much dancing and drinking, with initiates acting “like one possessed.” They were told that “you are another person ... you shine like a leopard” and other participants engaged in “dancing like maniacs” (Czekanowski 1917:248).

### **Enforcement**

Azande initiates were threatened with death if they offended members of the society or divulged its secrets (Evans-Pritchard 1937:527).

In Rwanda, members of the *Ryangombe* Cult forcibly drove away any uninitiated people, or sometimes killed them, as well as threatening members if any “indiscretions” occurred or if they revealed aspects of higher initiations (Czekanowski 1917:242–3,247).

### **Cannibalism**

Members of the *Ryangombe* Cult in Rwanda were reputed to eat corpses (Czekanowski 1917:267–8).

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

Azande used pots and magic stirring wands for making medicines. They also used whistles, rings, blue beads, and oracular “rubbing-boards” (Evans-Pritchard 1937:526,528,530,535).

The *Kubwanda* Society in Rwanda used sacred spears (hence, one expects spear points in material remains from secret societies), gourd rattles, and bucrania which were hung near huts or piled up (Meyer and Handzik 1916:195–7). The *Ryangombe* Cult used crowns and bells as insignia of their spirits and members (Czekanowski 1917:245).

### **Structures**

Azande secret societies traditionally met in “lodges far away in the bush” near a stream. The lodge was a rough, tunnel-like structure without walls but provided with a shrine and a pot for making medicines. A circle was cleared near the structure for dancing and socializing. The sacred rubbing-board oracle of the society was also “a long walk” away from the village (Evans-Pritchard 1937:90,517,528).

Higher initiations into the *Ryangombe* Cult of Rwanda took place “a considerable way” into the bush (Czekanowski 1917:247).

### **Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Organization**

The *Kubwanda* Society held great feasts and public displays for members “of the entire region” (Meyer and Handzik 1916:195). For the *Kiranga* ceremony honoring the major deity, “all the ababandwa [i.e., medicine men, sacrificers, soothsayers, or those possessed; Czekanowski 1917:238] of the region are invited.” The regional gathering involved hundreds of individuals (Meyer and Handzik 1916:196). Similarly, Czekanowski (1917:238) stated that the “hierarchy of secret societies ... creates dependencies that bridge” territorial chieftainships and clans, and, as stated above, also raised the possibility that the interlacustrine states might not exist without secret societies.

### **Power Animals**

Initiates in the *Ryangombe* Cult of Rwanda were told that they shone like leopards (Czekanowski 1917:248).

### **Proportion of Population**

No indication is given by Evans-Pritchard as to the proportion of village populations that belonged to secret societies. However, he does state that, formerly, forty to fifty people would attend lodge meetings, although he only ever saw about fifteen people in attendance (Evans-Pritchard 1937:520). This would seem to have been a small proportion of most village populations.

Members of the *Ryangombe* secret society in Rwanda were reported to include a large proportion of the population (Czekanowski 1917:237).

### **Sex**

Men and women were more or less equally represented in secret societies of the Azande (Baxter and Butt 1953:92).

The *Ryangombe* secret society in Rwanda had both male and female members (Czekanowski 1917:237).

Both men and women were members of the *Kubwanda* Society as long as they could pay the high admission cost and had strong influence (Meyer and Handzik 1916:199).

### **Age**

Azande children were sometimes initiated if they attended with members who were their mothers (Evans-Pritchard 1937:522).

### **Feasts**

The *Ababandwa* Society in Rwanda held great feasts and public displays of power after novices were initiated (Meyer and Handzik 1916:195).

## SUMMARY

Although the amount of information accessed was fairly limited, the major characteristics of the Central African secret societies were similar to secret societies in other parts of the world. This review indicates that more research might provide further insights. However, at this point it is more useful to turn attention to the more graphically documented secret societies of West Africa.

## CHAPTER NINE

### WEST AFRICA

#### INTRODUCTION

West Africa is one of the classic culture areas where secret societies have been documented. They occurred in southern Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and parts of Ghana and Guinea (Walter 1969:87), although the Ibo and some other West African groups apparently did not have secret societies (Talbot 1932:305). The secret societies of this area have been compared to the Eleusinian and Egyptian mystery religions, including maenad-like ecstatic dancing (Talbot 1912:40,225; Webster 1932:189–90). In addition to the detailed ethnographic accounts, this area is important because most of the documented groups occurred in the context of chiefdom political organizations (Walter 1969:89), although Bellman (1984:41) claimed that there were no centralized political structures in the Liberian area except those that were imposed. Whether this meant that there were transegalitarian groups in some areas and chiefdoms in other areas is unclear. Secret societies elsewhere in the world and in the preceding chapters mainly occurred in the context of transegalitarian societies. What is clear is that the largest secret societies cross-cut ethnic, linguistic, and political boundaries (Bellman 1984:13). Chapter 11 will further examine the overall role of secret societies in chiefdoms and states.

There were many secret societies in this culture area, and the more powerful they were, the more costly it was to join them (Talbot 1912:37). Most published observations pertain to the larger, more important secret societies, with the



lesser societies only mentioned in passing. The two major secret societies of the area were the *Poro* (with its women's version, the *Sande*, in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea) and the *Ekkpo* in southern Nigeria (a subdivision of the *Egbo*, both considered as Leopard Societies). In most areas there were other secret societies, some of which were locally more important than the *Poro* or *Ekkpo*. Some of these were the *Yassi*, *Kofung*, *Bondu* (a cognate of *Sande*), *Humei* (to regulate sexual conduct), and *Njaye* (to cure mental illness and promote fertility). In Nigeria, some of the more important societies were the *Sakapu*, the *Idiong* (claimed to be the most important), the *Ekong*, *Isong*, *Obbonn*, *Agbo*, the Human Alligators, and *Njawhaw* Societies. The *Mitiri Dibia* Society of the Igbo was also described as a fraternity of medicine men with most of the characteristics of secret societies (Uchendu 1965:81).

In general, secret societies controlled major aspects of the economy, education, politics, adjudication, sexual behavior, medicine, social services, recreation, and entertainment (Little 1965:349). The *Poro* ("earth") Society dealt with medicines (formerly including warrior medicines), initiations, sacrifices, spirit performances (dances or plays), dispute resolutions (including disputes between *Poro* officials in different communities), treaty talks, and relations with other secret society officials in other communities (Bellman 1984:25,27-8). It also announced many decisions concerning the community and validated various judgements (104). When the *Poro* spirit announced a need for community labor, all had to obey or pay large fines (40).

As in other areas (e.g., the Wolf Society of the Nuuchahnulth on the American Northwest Coast, several secret societies in California, and the *Suque* in Vanuatu), all males (and females for the *Sande*) were expected to join major societies in order to be given adult status in communities (Little 1967:120; Bellman 1984:8). However, within the general organization there were "a number of other secret societies" and "several subsidiary groups," the members of which had to first join the *Poro*, or the *Sande*, or a similar major society (Bellman 1984:8). Thus, Harley (1941a:123; 1941b:3) described the *Poro* as both a school and a secret society, and Webster (1932:94-5) described the higher *Poro* degrees as operating more or less independently of lower ranks, the higher ranks forming an inner circle that manipulated ceremonies for their personal advancement. As in the *Hamatsa* Society on the American Northwest Coast, there was some confusion as to whether these subsidiary groups should be considered as separate secret societies or as specialized roles within an overall secret society. Bellman (1984:31) referred to this as "a definitional problem about what constitutes a separate secret society."

In addition, it is not clear whether the many *Juju* Cults of Nigeria were part of major secret societies, whether they constituted separate minor secret societies, or whether they were something qualitatively different. They claimed to hold secrets to control or influence the fundamental powers of nature (the

*jujus*); they had head priests; their membership could extend over hundreds of miles; and they sold *jujus* for any number of cures, influences, weather, or other concerns (Talbot 1912:49–65). It is possible that fetish “doctors” took over many of the functions of secret societies, including initiations, if the societies went into decline, as Webster (1932:173fn,174) suggested. Similarly, it is not clear how the sacred pools, trees, and forest shrines related to the secret societies. Many of these had their own priests or guardians who proffered cures or favors via supernatural means and maintained small structures containing various paraphernalia, including drums, statues, and skulls from sacrifices (Talbot 1923:25–39).

To complicate matters further, Harley (1941b:3) referred to the *Poro* Society as age graded, owing to the intervals between initiations, which seemed at variance with claims that secret societies tended not to occur where age grades dominated, but the issue is cloudy. In any case, all major authors agree that secret society organizations were ethnographically present in West Africa, even if a strict application of the definition only pertained to certain societies or to the higher ranks or formal subdivisions of larger, tribal organizations like the *Poro*.

As on the North American Plains and Northwest Coast, there were some indications that the main secret societies in the past may have been predominantly warrior societies. The most dangerous *Poro* spirits were masked and costumed as warriors, and formerly, the *Poro* Society gave protective medicines to warriors, as well as holding treaty talks (Bellman 1984:28,30). Two of the other main secret societies were explicitly warrior societies which protected the community from supernatural dangers in contemporary times (Bellman 1984:34–5). These societies were very expensive to join and only included elites. However, other aspects seem to indicate that secret societies originated from ancestor worship. On the American Northwest Coast, in Africa, and in Melanesia, masks embodied ancestral spirits, even if these were ancestors from the mythological past, or were portrayed in animal forms, or were not technically genealogical ancestors but only previous title holders in the society (e.g., Harley 1941a:137). The hereditary nature of some roles on the Northwest Coast, in California, Melanesia, and Africa would seem to support the interpretation of secret societies developing from ancestor worship.

Another interesting parallel with other areas (e.g., the Northwest Coast) was the requirement that all non-members had to remain indoors during certain performances or processions in communities, often with dire results for those not observing the taboo (Bellman 1984:35; Harley 1941b:10; see also Talbot 1923:159–67). In addition, as in other areas like California and the Northwest Coast, new initiates spending time in seclusion were said to have gone to the spirit world where they were learning how to communicate with spirits (Talbot 1923:178).

The power animals that high-ranking members could transform themselves into were reminiscent of many of the main types of animals depicted on Upper Paleolithic cave walls (with due allowance for biogeographical differences), such as leopards, elephants, boars, bovids, but with the addition of pythons, primates, and alligators (Talbot 1912:80; 1923:88,95).

Bellman (1984:47–50) presented an interesting view of the secrets protected in the contemporary *Porro* Society. He argued that there were no deep religious secrets in the society but only secret signs of membership and the fiction behind the spirit impersonators. Rather than the specific supernatural contents of “secrets,” he argued that the real secret was how to control information (and people) so that virtually anything important could be treated as a secret (Bellman 1984:88). He maintained that the most basic secrets were widely known by non-members but that everyone was obligated to publicly play along with the fiction that they were secrets, much like adults play along with the Santa Claus fiction when around young children. Thus, women often knew *Porro* secrets but could not reveal that they knew “the secret” for fear of reprisals (76,83).

Contrary to this non-spiritual view, Bellman also stressed that part of the society ideology was a recognition that there are varying orders of reality (Bellman 1984:76,83,140). Belief in the dramatic fictions varied according to a person’s rank within secret societies (only the *Moling* leaders supposedly knew that the appearance of ancestral spirits was a theatrical illusion enacted by members; 84). In addition, there were hidden or covert messages in the symbols and verbal metaphors that were part of the secrets (85). It was also maintained that the *Porro* hierarchy controlled *Porro* spirits (104,47), implying some sort of esoteric knowledge or rituals. Medicines used by the society were supposed to “guarantee their [members’] success in attaining jobs, love and luck” (47), and information beyond general initiation had to be paid for, with the leaders being required to learn all rituals and medicines of the society (48). These observations sound like much more than mere banal or profane information about the cosmos or the sham supernatural powers of high-ranking members. Other writers have emphasized that there were many secret formulas for magic, medicines, and ways to access relationships with ancestral spirits (e.g., Walter 1969:87).

Bellman (1984:140) criticized Simmel (1950:361) for thinking that revelation of society secret contents would result in the collapse of the organizations and for maintaining that secret societies were autonomous from secular power. Simmel’s ideas were clearly not supported by the *Porro* example. Bellman (1984:143) also criticized Walter (1969), who claimed that the *Porro* power was based on terror used by elites in order to rule and that power over others was a motive for organizing secret societies based on early ethnographies by Harley (1941b:7,18). From my perspective, Walter and Harley were right: the desire for power was probably the origin of secret societies, although secret societies

may have had to make concessions to modern state rule in terms of the use of terror, and may have found alternative means of exercising power and control which Bellman observed a half century later.

Uchendu (1965:82) made the interesting observation that secret societies were like mutual insurance societies which enabled “the socially ambitious to invest the savings he accumulates in his youth while guaranteeing him economic support and prestige during his old age,” presumably thanks to the payments from initiations and from other sources that senior members enjoyed.

## OVERVIEW

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

As just mentioned, the early ethnographers made it clear that the goal of initiates in West African secret societies was to get into the high-ranking inner circles where members used spirit powers for selfish ends to control tribal affairs (e.g. Harley 1941b:7,18). Great men could start up new societies, some of which were blatantly predatory, but many new societies were ephemeral. Thus, the overall situation appears to have been quite fluid, with new masks being added to the society repertoires and others being deleted. In contrast to the self-interested motives of gaining power, a subtype of secret societies appears to have developed primarily to defend members against the predations of more powerful secret societies.

#### **Sources of Wealth**

Secret society members profited considerably from a number of sources including the removal of spells from enemies (and sometimes from those cast by fellow secret society members), dramatic performances at funerals and public or family events, fines, fees for settling disputes and conflicts, fees for promoting good crops or undertaking various commissions, tolls on roads, trade monopolies especially on palm oil production, and rules to safeguard members' economic interests. Even the women's *Sande* society obtained substantial revenues from services and fines for transgressions of the numerous and capricious ritual rules. There was also considerable requisitioning of food during the three- to four-year initiation cycle. Such requisitions were described as amounting to extortion and constituted serious drains on the wealth of the public. With so many sources of wealth and power at stake, it is hardly surprising that there were great rivalries between various mask owners and even between towns to recruit secret society members. Those considered upstarts and

those in the highest ranks were especially vulnerable to poisonings by rivals.

### **Political Relations**

In most cases, chiefs represented a nominal secular power within communities and regions. They always worked through the major secret societies and were constrained by the societies' leaders, essentially being puppet representatives of secret society dictates.

### *Tactics*

### **Ideology**

As in many other secret societies elsewhere in the world, the role of ancestors as a link to supernatural powers was critical in secret society ideology. In addition, ancestors could be contacted by entering sacred grounds and donning their masks, but they could also be manifested as transformed animals. In this ideology, high-ranking secret society members also had the ability to transform themselves into animals. Only high-ranking secret society members fully knew the secrets for contacting the spirits and in these cases, the wearers of masks could be viewed as oracles. If displeased, the ancestors could create sickness, droughts, or other misfortunes for the living, but presumably they could also provide health and wealth. According to secret society ideology, sickness, drought, and famine resulted from the breaking of secret society laws. The behavior of masked spirits and their representatives was claimed to be above all laws. Secluded candidates were portrayed as having been killed and residing in the land of the spirits from which they were brought back to life. In the ideology of the societies, powerful *mana* was supposed to derive from eating the meat of power animals and humans.

### **Benefits and Threats to Communities**

Secret societies dominated community life by using both the carrot and the stick. They claimed to provide a number of benefits to communities including general prosperity and welfare, settling disputes and conflicts, protection from sorcerers, regulated trade, standardized prices, education of community members, training for fighters and artisans, cures for sickness, oversight of political affairs, maintenance of morality, justice, and entertainment. They could get people to pay debts that were owed and have criminals executed. Where such appeals to the public interest were insufficient to obtain compliance, the predominant tactic used by secret societies to achieve their goals has been described as terror, especially directed at women and children (Harley 1941b:7,18,31; 1950:35).

In all these cases, the benefits to members seem to have overridden the benefits to communities.

**Esoteric Knowledge**

The secret knowledge that the *Poro* leaders used to contact spirits also reputedly gave them the ability to control weather, water, and fertility, as well as to master the art of “frightfulness.” Like subsequent chiefs and kings, some high-ranking members even claimed to be spirits.

**Exclusivity**

While almost all men and women were initiated into the lowest ranks of the major secret societies, the upper ranks of the *Poro* were invariably restricted to the wealthy thanks to the high costs of advancement, so that ultimately the highest *Poro* ranks were restricted to members of two or three of the most powerful kinship groups in Liberia. Membership in some other societies was restricted only to chiefs, while in the predatory societies, human sacrifices were required for admission. Minor societies were not so exclusive.

**Costs**

For entry levels, candidates supplied food and some cash. Higher levels became very expensive, with the proceeds going to the uppermost ranks of the societies. The costs in some societies were so exorbitant that those initiated could be reduced to poverty. Some initiates sold their wives and children to become members.

**Hierarchies**

In all societies, there was a pyramid of ranks, with the top rank acting almost like royalty. Lower ranks generally had specialized roles in the society.

**Public Displays**

In order to impress community members with the arcane and profane power of secret societies, processions, public dancing, and miracle performances were generally held by societies. Babies were killed and brought back to life, poisonous snakes were handled, bodies were pierced without ill effects. Masks were designed to be frightful, and costumes were made as gorgeous as possible in order to recruit new members. For some performances, women and uninitiated people were obligated to stay indoors on pain of death, but there can be little doubt that many of them peeked at the undertakings from inside their homes.

**Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

In order to recognize those who had been initiated, extensive scarification took place, as well as circumcision and removal of the clitoris.

Presumably initiates undergoing such procedures would have gone through preparations that placed them in altered states, which in turn could frequently lead to ecstatic experiences involving society spirits. Seclusion, sleep deprivation, wild maenad-like dancing, and painful experiences could have helped induce ecstatic states, as well as procedures used to psychologically transform members into animals. Such ordeals sometimes led to the death of candidates.

### **Enforcement**

Where neither putative benefits nor threats succeeded in obtaining acquiescence and compliance from community members, or even from lower-ranking society members, higher ranked secret society officials did not hesitate to use fines, floggings, destruction of offenders' property, and murder. Transgressions of a wide range of offenses led to death and often to eating the offender. Offenses included trespass in sacred society areas, ridiculing or desecrating masks or spirits, women viewing sacred activities, revealing the true nature of masked spirits, dropping masks or making major mistakes in performances, not fulfilling obligations to members, and insults to high-ranking members.

### **Human Sacrifice and Cannibalism**

Cannibalism is abundantly attested to as part of West African secret society rituals and enforcement measures. It undoubtedly played a major part in attempts to instill terror in both non-initiates and lower ranking members as well as in contributing to ecstatic types of experiences due to the extreme psychological states involved. The first meal of *Poro* candidates was a cannibalistic feast. The highest ranking members were expected to sacrifice and eat their oldest sons in order to assume office. Sacrifices were required for admission to some societies and for some rituals of personal gain.

### *Material Aspects*

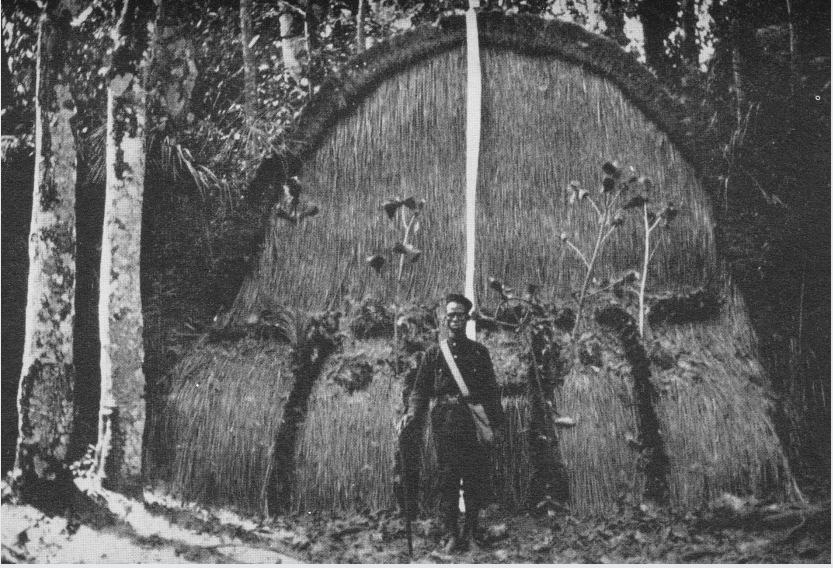
#### **Paraphernalia**

Bullroarers, cow and sheep horn trumpets, drums, flutes, pottery whistles, masks including small portrait masks, clay cones, razors, skulls, animal parts, tortoise shells, and cowrie shells were all used variously by secret societies.

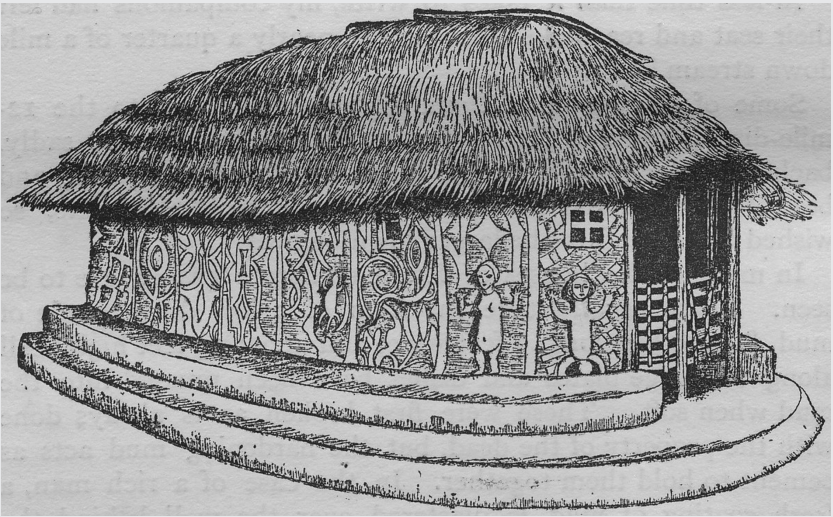
#### **Structures**

*Poro*, *Sande*, and Snakebite Societies had elaborate structures within villages. These were the repositories of society paraphernalia and masks (Fig. 9.1). These societies also maintained centers in the bush used for



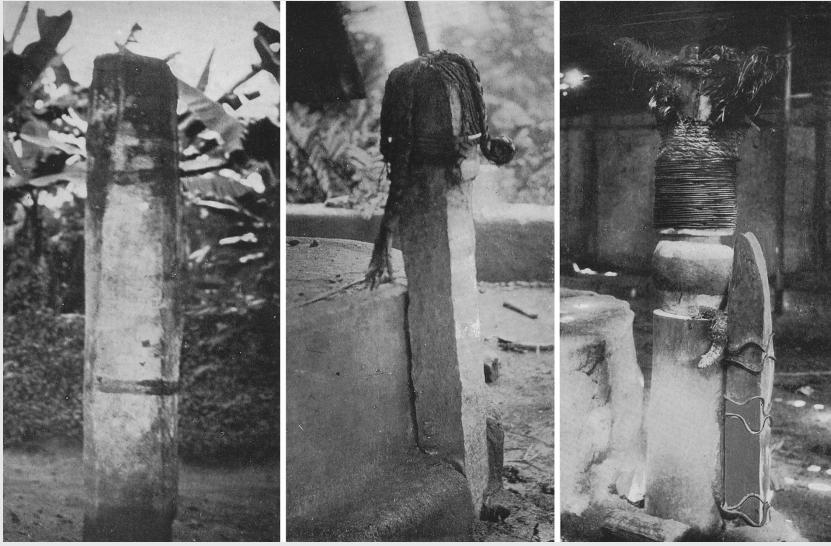


9.1 A guarded entrance to a *Poro* bush ritual structure in Sierra Leone (Newland 1916: facing 128).



9.2 Drawing of an *Igbo* ritual house near Abijang, Nigeria (Talbot 1912: 216). Note the basal platform and the distinctive ornamented walls.

initiations and important events where there were three residential structures for different grades. The *Egbo* also maintained centers in the bush as well as structures in villages featuring cut stone monoliths and pillars with skulls (Figs. 9.2 and 9.3).



9.3 Three examples of "Leopard stones" in or around *Poro* ritual houses in Liberia (Talbot 1912:facing 112).

### Burials

Burial practices for high-ranking members varied considerably, but were always unusual. *Poro* founders were said to be buried at the bush centers accompanied by slave sacrifices. Bodies of other officials were smoked and kept in the society's town structures or buried there. Other societies buried important members in secret locations far away from villages to prevent theft of body parts by those who wanted to appropriate *mana* from dead bodies of the powerful. In Nigeria, the most powerful leaders could be buried in shaft tombs dug in their compounds and accompanied by lavish grave goods and human sacrifices. Heads of slaves could be plastered and saved on household altars.

### Cross-cutting Kinship and Regional Organizations and Art Styles

High-ranking members of the most important secret societies in Liberia were from specific kinship groups, thus ensuring representation by multiple kin groups. There was also a central regional control for *Poro* organizations. The organizations could cross-cut tribal, ethnic, and even language groups. Members could participate in rituals or activities of *Poro* groups in any other locations. Similar practices occurred in Nigeria.

### **Power Animals**

Leopards, pythons, elephants, cattle, hawks, vultures, hornbills, gorillas, crocodiles, and chimpanzees were all important in secret society symbolism and rituals, with high-ranking members claiming to be able to transform themselves into these or other animals such as boars and buffaloes.

### **Number of Societies**

It appears that there were usually several secret societies in many villages.

### **Proportion of Population**

Everyone was theoretically supposed to be initiated into the lower grade of secret societies in *Poro* areas. In Nigeria, all males were expected to join a major secret society. However, the upper ranks were occupied only by small select groups.

### **Sex**

While one of the main goals of many secret societies seems to have been to terrify women, women also formed their own secret societies, perhaps to protect themselves from powerful men's secret societies. Rich influential women could also enter some men's secret societies and be given special roles and statuses.

### **Age**

Little information was obtained on the age of candidates, other than girls being admitted to the *Sande* Society at fourteen or fifteen years of age, and boys initiated at or before puberty.

### **Feasts**

Little information on feasting was available. However, it was clear that after successful initiations, feasts were held in the bush centers, in families, and in the villages. Feasts were also held after harvests in Nigeria.

### **Frequency**

Initiations into the *Poro* were said to be held every sixteen to eighteen years, with periods of seclusion for the boys lasting three to four years.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

### *Core Features*

#### **Motives and Dynamics**

Walter (1969) claimed, based on the early ethnographies by Harley (1941b), that the *Poro* power was based on terror used by elites in order to rule and that this was a motive for organizing secret societies. Specifically, Harley (1941b:7,18) argued that the "Poro was a place where human ambitions used spirit powers

for selfish ends. The final secret of the *Poro* was frightfulness.” More precisely, “the men’s whole concern was to keep the women and children terrified and to use the higher knowledge of the inner circle of priests for selfish ends” (Harley 1941b:18). In addition, the “control of tribal affairs rested in the hands of a few privileged old men of high degree in the *Poro* who worked in secret and ruled by frightfulness” (31).

There was considerable rivalry for power and benefits between mask-owning clan leaders, resulting in endemic petty warfare (Harley 1950:43) and, one would expect, attempts to outdo each other in ritual displays by secret societies in which leaders were prominent. There were attempts to poison other *zo* (secret society officials) and especially upstarts (10,32). Thus, the drive to acquire increasing benefits and power was plausibly the original motive for forming secret societies, even if more contemporary incarnations have had to make concessions in regard to power under modern state rule, and have had to find other means of exercising power and control besides unrestrained terror.

There was also great rivalry between towns to recruit desirable, wealthy *Igbo* members for their local chapters, resulting in attempts to outdo each other in the most gorgeous spirit costumes (Talbot 1912:44).

Secret societies in Liberia seem to have been relatively fluid since Harley (1941a:141; 1950:43) made reference to societies that were relatively short lived and to new masks being added to the hierarchy. In Sierra Leone, some secret societies, such as the predatory Human Leopard Society, were said to have originated c. 1875–85, which Newland (1916:130–2) postulated might have been the result of the cessation of tribal wars, resulting in a lack of human bodies to use for making fetishes. Newland (1916:133) also portrayed secret societies as being relatively fluid since he thought that they could spring up to protect individuals from the depredations of other more powerful secret societies.

In Nigeria, there was a very powerful secret society, the *Nsibidi*, that existed before the *Egbo* Cult. Membership was restricted to chiefs, and they executed criminals and developed a proto-writing system of symbols (Talbot 1912:305–6). Great men started new societies (Talbot 1923:200), and *Juju* Cults were adopted from other towns (Talbot 1912:50).

### Sources of Wealth

Senior Mende women in the *Sande* Society obtained “substantial income” from services as well as from initiations. Groups often publicly advertised themselves and their services (Little 1967:128,130). *Sande* officials adjudicated ritual “crimes” and received a portion of the fines (Bellman 1984:33). The heads of the Snakebite Society received the fees from initiations as well as the fees they charged (1 shilling) for viewing the sacred box of the society (Harley 1941a:105). The society also collected fines for any breaches of their protocols,

of which there were many and they were usually capricious (e.g., entering with the right foot, use of the right hand, standing while drinking, emptying the ritual drinking bowl without permission, defecating in town during ritual events, ritual sexual abstinences, crossing in front of masked spirits, not reporting the killing of a hawk or other power animal, and many more; see, e.g., Harley 1941a:109,116; 1950:30,36). Society members would also put sickening spells on people for disrespect, debts, or other reasons and then charge the afflicted person a fee for removing the spell (Harley 1950:117–20).

*Poro* members could also place taboos on the use of resources, including land, so as to reserve them for their own use (Webster 1932:110). The regional heads of the *Poro* charged fees from subordinate local heads for the use of their whetstones to sharpen ritual razors (Harley 1941b:8–9; 1950:132–3). In fact, the higher *zo* were so well provided for by such fees that all their needs were supplied and they did no real work of their own (Harley 1941b:8–9). In Sierra Leone, *Poro* members “held up all the roads and passes, exacting toll from those who traded or travelled” (Newland 1916:127). Members of the *Yassi* Society also charged fees for curing sicknesses caused by the medicines of enemies (Newland 1916:126).

During the lengthy *Poro* initiation seclusion period (three to four years traditionally), anywhere from seven to twenty-two different masked spirits would visit the supporting towns to beg, borrow, steal, or extort food from households for use in the bush school. No one dared to refuse and these appropriations, characterized as “extortion,” constituted “a serious drain on the public wealth” and community resources (Harley 1941b:8,16–17; 1950:29). In Sierra Leone, “donations” were “commandeered” or exacted from households during processions of initiates (Newland 1916:128).

Masked dancers at funerals obtained chickens, palm wine, cows, and gifts for their performances. They also imposed fines on people who could not answer their questions (Harley 1950:18). When masked spirits visited towns, they could also demand palm wine as well as catch and kill any loose animals (18). When they visited towns as judges, residents killed a cow for them, and they were paid for settling disputes, for dancing, and to promote good crops (18–19). Masked spirits accompanied warriors to battle and expected to get cow, human, or other meat; they received four cows and a slave from each side in battles that they stopped, and the fines that they imposed usually were a cow or a sheep plus baskets of rice (20). Masked spirits also served as messengers and police in collecting debts and fines for which they were paid commissions (21–2). Masked spirits appeared for many births, deaths, puberty celebrations, building important structures, the installation of new chiefs, the recruitment of warriors, victories, calamities, to bring rain, to relate local history and traditions, and performances at major trials and feasts. In all these appearances fees were charged, some of which were used to host feasts



for the elders or the community (23–7,34,37). The spirits always received a portion of sacrificed animals and rice (24). There were fees for helping women to conceive, for keeping workers safe while working in swiddens, for safe and successful hunting and fishing, and for curing (34,37–8). The fees were divided between the *zos* and the food obtained was eaten in the bush (38).

Members of the warrior secret society subgroups gave human sacrifices to the society in order to obtain wealth and power (Bellman 1984:35). Leaders of the *Poros* danced through their communities to “accept tribute from each family in the town” and this money was divided among the leaders (82,131–2).

In Nigeria, the *Egbo*, like the *Poros*, imposed fines for minor infractions of its regulations and these constituted “the main revenues of the Club” (Talbot 1912:45). The *Egbo* also “made trade almost impossible for nonmembers” (39), and ensured that debts to members (possibly even trumped-up debts) were paid, which was a major advantage of membership (46). The *Ekkpo* claimed a monopoly on the processing of palm oil nuts which was a main source of wealth (Talbot 1923:188). Members of secret societies or *Juju* Cults also received food payments for providing *Juju* medicines for curing sickness, for getting debts paid, for weather working, killing thieves, obtaining relationships with the opposite sex, finding sorcerers, and for getting favorable court decisions (Talbot 1912:53,65). Successful *Juju* priests “amassed great wealth” (141). The *Sakapu* Society, and presumably other secret societies, performed at the funerals of chiefs and rich men, and this was costly (Talbot 1932:234–5). In general, it appears that the secret societies to which chiefs belonged performed at chiefs’ funerals (Talbot 1923:142,159–67). The secret societies also demanded payments from anyone playing drums or invoking *jujus* (spirits) and from girls who became betrothed (Talbot 1932:300,302).

Members of the *Mitiri Dibia* Society of the Igbo established society laws or rules that safeguarded members’ economic interests (Uchendu 1965:81).

### Political Connections

The *Poros* Society had very strong connections with political authorities: “no one could hope to occupy any position of authority in the chiefdom without being a *Poros* member and receiving *Poros* support” (Little 1967:184–5). This included chiefs who were only nominal secular powers and always worked through the *Poros*. *Poros* leaders controlled affairs and people; they regulated the society and the economy; and the *Poros* tribunal had the final say in judicial matters (Harley 1941b:3,7,31). All important meetings apparently took place in the bush so that the only publicly visible evidence of the *Poros* was when the masked spirits appeared (31). High chiefs were sometimes also in the highest secret society rank which gave them incomparable increases in power, even though this was always constrained by other high-ranking members of the

secret society (Walter 1969:94). All “special matters” were dealt with by secret societies (Harley 1950:viii).

The *Ekkpe* and *Sakapu* Societies of Nigeria are described as having “usurped [or perhaps developed] all functions of government” and as having “immense powers” in their communities (Talbot 1912:39; 1932:300). Among the Ibo, joining the *Ozo* Society conferred a great deal of power which was exercised in conjunction with elders and chiefs (Arinze 1970:5).

### *Tactics*

#### **Ideology**

Ancestral spirits were the primary object of worship, and in secret society ideologies they were represented as masks, but ancestors were also supposed to be able to enter animals to undertake tasks, as could living adepts. Portrait masks of the living or dead powerful people were said to still harbor their spirits which could be contacted by wearing the masks as well as by using them as oracles (Harley 1941a:137; 1950:vii,3,35–6,41–2,47). Spirits of dead *ozo* became masks (Harley 1941b:10). Masks, and the rituals in which they were used or acquired, were made hideous in order to instill fright in the viewers as well as the users (Harley 1950:35). As in secret society ideologies elsewhere, masked spirits claimed to be “immune from all laws and regulations,” and “above the law”; a mask owner was “almost a law unto himself,” except for the constraints of the secret society (Harley 1950:33,43; 1941b:31). Acquiring a mask of the highest rank even required the sacrifice and eating of one’s own son, while acquiring lesser masks required human sacrifices. The individual members were not responsible for their actions since these were manifestations of the spirits and the spirits of the masks demanded the appropriate behavior by their owners (Harley 1950:86,96). The *Ozo* Society of the Ibo similarly focused on the connection with ancestral spirits to obtain desired goals (Arinze 1970:5).

The “real power,” according to Liberian *Poro* ideology, resulted from the knowledge of, and ability to act for, the *Poro* spirits, which only the high-ranking officials claimed to have (Bellman 1984:47,104–5). The *Poro* was the means by which spirits could be contacted, and the primary location for contacting these spirits was deemed the sacred ground of the *Poro* (Harley 1941b:4,7).

Death and resurrection were key ideological components of most secret societies. Boy novices underwent sham deaths, with chicken blood spewing out when they were “pierced” (Harley 1941b:13). Similarly, candidates for the *Kofung* Society in Sierra Leone simulated death and were brought back to life by high-ranking society members (Newland 1916:126). During their period of seclusion and training, initiates were portrayed as having been swallowed by a powerful spirit resulting in their death, and as residing in the land of



the spirits (Talbot 1923:178; Harley 1941b:3,15; 1950:11). Another ideological component of powerful secret societies was that members possessed attendant animal spirits that could be summoned, and that some members could transform themselves into those animals (Newland 1916:126). Powerful members of secret societies were reputed to transform themselves into animals in order to carry out special missions such as killings (see "Power Animals") (Talbot 1912:80; 1923:88,95; Harley 1950:35–6,41–2,47).

In secret society ideology, eating the meat of powerful animals or humans could increase the consumer's soul force by absorbing the spirit of the animal. Eating the meat of powerful animals was suitable only for priests and warriors (Harley 1950:8). The highest, most effective sacrifice was one's own son. In addition to ancestral contacts, the *mana* of forest animals was considered very powerful, and thus was represented in masks often with both animal and ancestral characteristics.

According to Mende secret society ideology, sickness was the result of transgressions of secret society rules or other ritual prohibitions (Little 1967:248). Drought and famines in Liberia were blamed on the breaking of *Poro* laws (Harley 1950:23). Sickness in Nigeria was attributed to dereliction in offering sacrifices to *jujus* which involved all the mysterious forces of nature, including *mana*. Dealing with *jujus* was the means to control those forces and influence them (Talbot 1912:49,53).

### Community Benefits and Threats

The *Poro* claimed to work for the benefit of Mende and other communities by offering cures, creating general prosperity and welfare, as well as regulating trade, fixing prices, adjudicating disputes, educating members, training fighters and artisans, overseeing political affairs, providing entertainment, promoting agricultural fertility, establishing harvest taboos, and in general providing a moral framework for the community (Newland 1916:129; Harley 1941b:3–7; Little 1967:184–5,228,248). The power of the *Poro* was exhibited in destructive performances and in the ability to kill transgressors of *Poro* edicts. The public function of the masked spirits was to make medicines, to protect communities from sorcerers, to mete out justice, and to hold public rituals and entertainments (Harley 1950:32). In Sierra Leone, the *Poro* also established laws for governing the whole community (Newland 1916:127).

Other Liberian secret societies appear to have benefited primarily their own members' strength, longevity, and self-interests, and were therefore viewed by many as "bad" (Harley 1941a:139–41). For instance, members of the Human Leopard Society tried to acquire the strength of leopards, and to renew their own, youth and vigor by ritual cannibalism. The Human Crocodile, Human Baboon, and Python Societies were similar and featured cannibalistic rites that were often used to remove rivals (Newland 1916:130–1). The Sorcery Society

used spells for members' benefits, and also engaged in cannibalistic rites (Harley 1941a:139–41). Lesser, generally short-lived, societies tried to enable members to openly steal or obtain sex at will (Harley 1941a:141). Presumably, the Warrior Society and the Snakebite Society claimed to provide beneficial protection and cures for their communities. A general advantage of belonging to the *Poro* was protection from other predatory societies like the Human Leopard and Human Alligator Societies (Newland 1916:129–30). The *Bondu* Society of women in Sierra Leone (a cognate of the *Sande*) protected its members from men who tried to lead girls astray (125). The *Yassi* Society provided cures for those affected by the “medicines” of enemies (126). One of the main benefits of belonging to the *Igbo* Society was its ability to obtain payments for debts (Talbot 1912:46).

However, many of the touted community benefits and morals were framed from the perspective of the leaders of the secret societies. As has already been noted, “the men’s whole concern was to keep the women and children terrified and to use the higher knowledge of the inner circle of priests for selfish ends” (Harley 1941b:18). The *Egbo* Society similarly “usurped practically all the functions of government” (Talbot 1912:39).

### Esoteric Knowledge

The power of the *Poro* Society among the Mende was said to derive from the supernatural connections that the senior officials claimed to have (Little 1967:183). *Poro* leaders claimed to have supernatural powers, as well as contact privileges with the spirit world, and even to become spirits (Harley 1941b:3–7). Secret knowledge included the plant composition of medicines; how to control weather, water and fertility; and the art of “frightfulness” (Harley 1941b:32). Among the Mano, the *zo* knew the most spells which constituted “part of the secret which would explain all misfortune and disease” and thus could confer great wealth on those with this knowledge (Harley 1941a:121–2).

Members of some Liberian secret societies, such as the two main warrior societies, claimed the ability to transform themselves into various animals (Bellman 1984:34–5). The same was true of Nigerian secret societies (Talbot 1912:80; 1923:88,95). Those who controlled *juju*, controlled the mysterious forces of nature (Talbot 1923:49).

In Nigeria, members of the *Mitiri Dibia* Society acquired the power to “see things” and became adepts in all priestly functions (Uchendu 1965:81).

### Exclusivity

Although all adults theoretically belonged to the *Poro*, high officials apparently came exclusively from certain kinship groups of supreme hereditary standing (Harley 1941b:5,32; 1950:vii; Little 1967:8,240,244) or a single patrilineage (Bellman 1984:22). Similarly, the officials in the *Sande* Society were matrilineally related (34). Children of *Poro* officials were given special training (9).

Boys entering the *Poro* bush school were divided into three groups slated for differential training: sons of elites, sons of priestly *zos*, and common boys (Harley 1941b:8,105; 1950:vi). "Only a very wealthy man of advanced years could pay the fees and hope to pass initiation into these higher degrees reserved for nobility" (Harley 1941b:31). The inner circle constituted "real royalty."

The *zos* had hereditary roles within kin groups and were ranked (Harley 1941b). Only *Poro* and *Sande* graduates could be members of the Snakebite Society, while only *zos* and big men could belong to the Python Society (Harley 1941a:116).

In the 1930s, there was another organization within the *Poro*, the *Ki La Mi*, which was an inner circle that made decisions of importance (probably constituting a high council that dealt with important issues under a high priest; Harley 1950:viii). Within the *Ki La Mi* Society, there was another even higher ranked society, the *Ki Gbuo La Mi*. Entry to all of these societies was further restricted by abilities and costs, which could be extremely high (Harley 1950:viii) (see "Initiation Costs"). Membership in the main warrior secret societies was restricted to elites (Bellman 1984:34,36,84).

Admission to the *Yassi* Healing Society in Sierra Leone was restricted to members of the *Poro* and *Bondu* Societies, "so, like the other secret societies, it is distinctly a caste or class organization" (Newland 1916:126).

In order to become a chief, Ibibio individuals had to belong to the *Ekong* (war) Society, admission to which required a human sacrifice (Talbot 1923:178–80). Powerful chiefs were members of the *Ekkpo Njawhaw* (Spirit Destroyer) Society (Talbot 1923:198). The predecessor of the *Igbo* Society, the *Nsibidi* Society, was restricted to chiefs, while the *Mariba* grade or subdivision of the *Igbo* Society was restricted to *Igbo* members of the higher ranks (Talbot 1912:42,305–6). The *Ozo* Society of the Ibo required considerable wealth to join (Arinze 1970:5), as did the *Mitiri Dibia* and other *Igbo* secret society variants (Uchendu 1965:81–2; see "Initiation Costs"). Lesser societies were less powerful and less costly to join (Uchendu 1965:37).

### Initiation Costs

In Sierra Leone, when candidates entered the *Poro* House, they were "mulcted of fees" according to their degree (Newland 1916:128). Initiation into the general *Poro* Society (the lowest grade) of the Mende involved the giving of oil, fowl, and other food three times as well as several pounds sterling in cash (Little 1967:119,122–3,129). In earlier times, a boy's father had to pay two cloths (2 shillings each), provide brass ornaments, and give a chicken, or else his son would be killed (Harley 1941a:128,130; 1950:30). Fees were paid to the senior *Poro* members (Little 1967:244).

Admission to the higher levels of the *Poro* has been described as involving "stiff fees" for admission to the higher ranks (Harley 1941b:32). "Only a very

wealthy man of advanced years could pay the fees and hope to pass initiation into these higher degrees reserved for the nobility" (Harley 1941b:31). Initiation costs for entry into the *Sande* Society were also high, amounting to about £5–7 sterling, largely in the form of rice, fowl, a gallon of palm oil, a barrel of rum, herbs, mats, cash, and cloth (Little 1967:129). Initiation into the subsidiary Sheephorn Devil Society, to which all *Poro* officials belonged, was "very expensive" (Bellman 1984:29). Similarly, admission to the two main warrior secret societies was very costly (Bellman 1984:34,36,84). New initiates received some gifts upon admission (Bellman 1984:82). Admission fees for entering higher ranked societies such as the *Ki La Mi* are simply described as "high" (Harley 1950:viii).

Admission to some other secret societies in Liberia involved human sacrifices, and advancement could entail killing and eating one's own son (e.g., in the Leopard, Python, Sorcerers, and Crocodile Societies) (Harley 1941a:139–40; 1950:35). Admission fees for the Snakebite Society included a ring and 2 shillings (plus 2 shillings for learning medicinal preparations), while the fee for becoming the head of the society was 20 shillings (Harley 1941a:105). These fees went to the leader of the society.

To join the *Idiong* Society, the first initiation rite lasting a week required the payment of 900 metal rings (c. £6 sterling), 15 pots of palm wine, 20 fowl, 20 sticks of dried fish, 23 seed yams, 23 cooking yams, plus an additional 500 rings to the head of the society and 70 rings to each member (Talbot 1923:173). To learn how to be transformed into an animal was reserved for the high-ranking members who had to pay fees to learn the procedure (88). The fees were so exorbitant that novices were sometimes reduced to poverty and even sold their wives and children in order to join the societies (171).

To advance to the fourth grade in the *Igbo* Society cost £30 in goods plus holding a major feast with meat and palm wine (Talbot 1912:41), while other estimates placed the cost of entering all of the successive grades at over £1,000 which was divided among high-ranking members (Webster 1932:94).

Among the Ibo, wealth was the main requirement for joining the *Ozo* Society. Candidates paid £150–400 and sponsored several feasts in order to be admitted (Arinze 1970:5). The *Mitiri Dibia* and other *Igbo* Societies also had high admission costs which were divvied up among members (Uchendu 1965:81–2).

### **Hierarchies and Roles**

Senior women who attained high grades in the *Sande* Societies of the Mende through training controlled the affairs of the society (Little 1967:126). The control of the *Poro* Society was vested in senior hereditary members and those with extensive training (Little 1967:140,244), although the ultimate head was the head of the *Poro* (Harley 1941b:27). Junior members had to carry out the decisions of officials and had no power of their own (Little 1967:245).

The Liberian *Poro* had a thirteen-man hierarchy that involved special functions including the “father,” those in charge of the “devils,” a person to greet new novices, a keeper of the gate, a keeper of the door to the officials’ or priests’ house, those responsible for training initiates, a disciplinarian, a scarifier, an adjudicator, guardians of medicines, entertainers and jesters, announcers, a leopard, collectors of fines, food collectors, truant officers, and assistants (Harley 1941b:20–1; Bellman 1984:25,30,105; also Newland 1916:128). There were also twenty-four masked roles, including a leopard (Harley 1941b:24–6). The *Poro* has been described as a “pyramid of degrees” numbering up to ninety-nine, all with advancement fees (Harley 1941b:5). The highest *Poro* degrees have been described as “postgraduate” terrorists and experts in fright (Walter 1969:94), as well as “real royalty” for the innermost circle (Harley 1941b:31). Even during the seclusion period of initiation, boys were ranked and segregated into groups of children of rulers, children of *zo* (professionals), and common children (Harley 1950:vi). The societies had a clear hierarchy between themselves (Harley 1950:viii).

The Snakebite Society had ten grades below the head *zo*, including neophytes, messengers, doorkeepers, ritual assistants, instructors, and female members (Harley 1941a:110). The *Yassi* Society in Sierra Leone had five ranks (Newland 1916:126).

The *Egbo* Society in Nigeria had seven grades for the lesser mysteries plus another grade (the *Mariba*, or “Bush Leopard”) which operated like a separate secret society reserved only for those in the higher grades of the *Egbo*. The head of the seventh *Egbo* grade was the leader of the *Egbo* and the most powerful person in the town (Talbot 1912:39–43).

### Public Display of Powers and Wealth

During *Poro* initiations, the *Poro* spirit and other members danced three times in the town. Anything that the *Poro* spirit touched was destroyed, including trees, thereby leaving visible material testimony of the power of the spirits (Little 1967:122–3,125). There was also a procession to the town after initiations and for important events such as chiefs’ funerals. These were accompanied by masked *Poro* spirits (Little 1967:184,246; also Bellman 1984:25). New *Sande* initiates, accompanied by the masked *Sande* spirits, participated in a procession to their village, where the initiates were given gifts (Little 1967:128).

Masks, and the rituals in which they were used or acquired (including the sacrifice of one’s own son or other humans), were made hideous in order to instill fright in the viewers as well as the users (Harley 1950:35). “The final secret of the *Poro* was frightfulness” (Harley 1941b:7). An exception was the clownish chimpanzee mask which taught moral lessons by breaking taboos, destroying or damaging things, and doing wrong things (Harley 1941b:41) similar to the clowns and tricksters of the American Northwest and Southwest.

For the two most important warrior secret societies in Liberia, all non-members had to stay indoors during society passages through the town (Bellman 1984:35). Before the new initiates returned to the town, the *Poro* spirit visited it to announce the event to everyone. For the “birth” of the new initiates, however, non-members had to remain indoors but probably could observe events from inside homes through windows (Bellman 1984:81; also Newland 1916:128). One of the abilities members of the Snakebite Society acquired was to be able to handle poisonous snakes without being harmed (Harley 1941a:111–12). This, presumably, was used as a public display of their supernatural powers.

There was considerable rivalry between mask-owning clan leaders resulting in endemic petty warfare (Harley 1950:43), and one would expect attempts to outdo each other in public ritual displays by the secret societies in which they held high ranks.

In southern Nigeria, there were performances in market places or open areas (presumably by secret societies) which sometimes bore striking resemblances to the staged supernatural displays of the American Northwest Coast and Plains. In the Nigerian performances, a baby was killed and eaten, then brought back to life (although Talbot suspected that two babies were actually involved); a man was beheaded but the head replaced and the man returned to life; a palm stem was driven through the throat and body of a person, then withdrawn without any injury; and there was rope walking and dancing on the top of thin poles, as well as “bird dancing” on ropes like aerial acrobatics (Talbot 1923:72–9). The *Ekkpo Njawhaw* and *Ekong* Societies performed major ceremonies in the public square where the society fetish was displayed, with a procession at the new yam harvest (181, 188). The culmination of initiations into the *Ekong* Society included a procession around the town and to the market or recreational area (176, 180). Performances or large public processions by secret societies were also held at the funerals of high-ranking members of the *Egbo* Society and of chiefs or rich men (Talbot 1923:142, 154–7, 159–67; 1932:234–5). There was great rivalry between towns to recruit *Igbo* members for their local chapters, resulting in public attempts to outdo each other in the most lavish spirit costumes (Talbot 1912:44).

### **Sacred Ecstatic Experiences**

*Poro* initiations were characterized by long seclusions and ordeals involving considerable pain (especially from scarification and circumcision that sometimes resulted in death), hardships, and little sleep (Harley 1941b:15, 17; Little 1967:121). Altered states of consciousness would normally result from such extreme conditions. *Sande* initiations involved three months of seclusion in the bush as well as excision of the clitoris (Little 1967:127–8). In Liberia, the seclusion period was traditionally three years in a bush village (Bellman 1984:33).

Members of some Liberian secret societies (the two main warrior societies) claimed the ability to transform themselves into various animals which probably involved altered states of consciousness if not sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) (Bellman 1984:34–5).

Nigerian secret societies and *Juju* Cults involved ecstatic dancing that produced trance states, especially in the *Ekkpa* Women's Society with "maenad-like" wild performances. Strangers were excluded from these performances (Talbot 1912:74,225).

### **Marking Initiates: Scarification**

*Poro* initiates were circumcised and heavily scarred on their backs, chests, and necks using society motifs symbolizing tooth marks from having been killed and "eaten" by the *Poro* spirit (Harley 1941a:124–5; 1941b:15; Little 1967:120; Bellman 1984:80). *Sande* initiates in Liberia were also scarred and the clitoris was excised (Bellman 1984:33). Such scarification and circumcision may have served to guarantee recognition of individuals as bona fide members of the society (see "Regional Organization").

### **Enforcement**

As previously noted, Walter (1969) claimed that the *Poro* power was based on terror used by elites in order to rule. Similarly, Harley (1941b:7,18) argued that the final secret of the *Poro* was frightfulness (Harley 1941b:7), and "the men's whole concern was to keep the women and children terrified." The "control of tribal affairs rested in the hands of a few privileged old men of high degree in the *Poro* who worked in secret and ruled by frightfulness" (31).

*Poro* initiates swore oaths on a tray of human fingers and toes from sacrifices and punished individuals (Harley 1941a:127; Bellman 1984:138). It was claimed that those who revealed *Poro* secrets or broke the taboo on sexual relationships during initiations or ran away were killed and eaten (Harley 1941a:124,127; 1950:vi,29; Little 1967:122; Newland 1916:127). Undisciplined boys were flogged, sometimes to death (Harley 1941b:9). Frequently one of the boy initiates was killed for an offense against the society (Harley 1950:vi,30). Boys who ridiculed the *Poro* or the spirits, imitated their voices, peeked at them, were guilty of offenses, or refused to join were killed and eaten as were members who desecrated masks, revealed the wearer in public, or cut scars too deeply (Harley 1941a:134; 1941b:8,10,14–15,20). Women who witnessed *Poro* activities were similarly killed and eaten unless they were rich enough to pay a fine of three cows, although then they were rendered dumb for life so that they could not reveal what they had seen (Harley 1941a:127,134).

Paths to the *Poro* bush school were tabooed, and anyone caught on them was flogged (Harley 1950:28). Decisions of the *Poro* inner council were enforced by armed bands of men masquerading as spirits of the society who would descend



on any village that did not obey their dictates (Little 1965:355; 1967:184). It was a major disaster if the mask of one of the society performers came off during a performance revealing the person underneath, and vengeance was exacted by the spirit or the person was killed outright (Harley 1950:31; Little 1967:252). Any unauthorized person touching the sacred box of the Snakebite or other secret societies was killed (Harley 1941a:108). Magic was also used to control members of the Snakebite Society if they twice failed to heed a call to meet or if they did not keep promises. Magic was also used on members of the general populace who showed disrespect, failed to pay debts, or overcharged, and for vengeance (Harley 1941a:118–20). Any insults or violence to members of the highest ranking *Ki Gbuo La Mi* Society were tantamount to treason (Harley 1950:ix).

Accidental viewing of some secret society activities or spirits was said to have resulted in blindness, leprosy, or death (Bellman 1984:29). Women who openly discussed *Poro* knowledge or secrets, or who accidentally witnessed society activities could be killed (Bellman 1984:83). The *Bondu* Women's Society also had the power to fine, flog, or exact other penalties from those who broke its rules or led *Bondu* girls astray (Newland 1916:125), while males who trespassed on *Sande* sacred grounds were killed (Harley 1941b:27), somewhat reminiscent of the retributions of Dionysian maenads.

In southern Nigeria, high-ranking secret society members who could transform themselves into animals were thought to do so for evil purposes, especially members of the Human Alligator Society (affiliated with the Leopard, or *Ekkpe* Society). When in alligator form, they killed people who displeased them (Talbot 1923:88,95). Non-members of societies that publicly witnessed certain open air performances of the societies (often in the villages) were flogged or killed if they came out of their houses (159–67). Breaking the rules of the *Ekkpo Njawhaw* (Spirit Destroyer) Society led to a masked procession of spirits who destroyed the house of the offender (189–90). In fact, members of this society could “break anything” of those they considered enemies (199), and those who quarreled with high ranking members were killed (183). Trespass into sacred *Egbo* places was punished by killing the offenders (Talbot 1923:170; 1912:44–5). Anyone who revealed secrets of their society or who did not respect the society rules was killed. Lesser infractions resulted in fines (e.g., spirit impersonators revealing themselves to non-members sacrificed a cow and paid for a feast) (Talbot 1912:40,44–5).

### **Human Sacrifice and Cannibalism**

The first meal of neophytes during their initiation into the *Poro* was a slave boy who had been sacrificed. Any of the boys or others who revealed secrets of the *Poro* also became the main fare for *Poro* cannibal meals (Harley 1941a:124; 1950:28). In general, some *Poro* rituals, especially the more important ones, involved human torture, killing, and consumption. The regional heads and

the local chapter heads of *Poros* Societies had to sacrifice and eat their own eldest sons in order to assume their roles or acquire needed paraphernalia (Harley 1941a:132–3; 1941b:8–9; 1950:vi,5,8), presumably because there was no more powerful demonstration of commitment to the society. Spirit costumes and major masks also had to be consecrated with a human sacrifice (Harley 1950:vi,5,8,17; 1941b:11). The construction of the *Poro* sacred house in a town was supposed to be consecrated with four human sacrifices (Harley 1941b:18–19). Members of the Liberian warrior secret society subgroups gave human sacrifices to the society in order to obtain wealth and power (Bellman 1984:35), and formerly all groups used human sacrifice (Bellman 1984:47). Boys who died during *Poro* initiations from infections or blood loss were also eaten (Harley 1941b:17). Other examples of cannibalism are provided under “Enforcement.”

Human sacrifices were also offered for important public events (e.g., at rain or war ceremonies) (Harley 1941b:138). The Leopard Society in Liberia used ritual cannibalism to promote youth and vigor among its older members (Harley 1941b:139). Admission to the society, as well as to the Python Society, the Sorcery Society, and the Crocodile Society required a human sacrifice killed by members in leopard or animal costumes (Harley 1941b:139; see also Newland 1916:130–1).

In southern Nigeria, the Warrior Society consumed human, leopard, or hippo meat at all their ceremonies, and initiation occurred mainly after taking an enemy head and eating its flesh (Talbot 1932:302–4). There were also human sacrifices, which were eaten, for *jujus* (Talbot 1912:75). The numerous human skulls displayed on the pillars in front of *Igbo* Houses (Talbot 1912:257) probably represented human sacrifices. Part of the price of initiation into the *Ekong* (War) Society was the sacrifice of a young and beautiful female slave (Talbot 1923:179–80). Slaves were also publicly sacrificed in market places or recreation areas for some secret society ceremonies and in order to attract the trade that was associated with ceremonies (181,186,188). Those killed for infractions of society rules were sometimes eaten, and one of the public performances featured the killing and eating of an infant (72,159–67). Female slaves of chiefs were sacrificed and eaten when the chiefs died, or they were buried alive with the dead chief (Talbot 1923:152–4; 1932:248), a practice which may have extended to funerals of other high ranking secret society officials (Talbot 1923:154–7).

### *Material Aspects*

#### **Paraphernalia**

The *Poro* used a cow horn with a hole in it for blowing and making noises attributed to spirits (Little 1967:119). Bullroarers were used in most of western Africa to represent the voice of spirits (Harley 1941b:3,14–15). Horns or



9.4 An ornamented spoon used in *Poro* rituals by the Kra tribe in Liberia. Reprinted by permission from Harley 1941b:Plate 13a.

tortoise shells were also used as fetishes (as were chimpanzee teeth) or to contain medicines for the high priest (Harley 1941a:127,129; 1941b:13). Priests also used drums, masks, leopard skins, and medicines (Little 1967:246). It is unclear to what extent the use of drums may have been the exclusive prerogative of secret societies. Specially carved spoons (Fig. 9.4) were used for rituals and feasts, including *Sande* ceremonies (Harley 1941b:29; 1950:40).

In Liberia one of the *Poro* subsocieties was the Sheephorn Devil Society to which all *Poro* leaders belonged. An “auditory illusion” was created by blowing into a specially designed sheep’s horn to make a “unique sound” (Bellman 1984:29,31). Four horns were blown in unison in the main *Poro* Society to represent the voice of the *Poro* spirit (Bellman 1984:31). One horn alone was like a human scream. Similarly, three or four pottery whistles were blown at

once to represent the voice of spirits (Harley 1941b:15). Leaders of the *Poro* kept a black clay cone for the most powerful spirit (Harley 1941a:130; 1941b:10). Flutes, and clay pot resonators were also said to be the voices of spirits (Harley 1950:4,31). The regional head kept a sacred horn and a Neolithic celt used as a whetstone for sharpening ritual razors and hooks used for scarification and sacrifices. *Poro* chapter heads had to use this whetstone and pay fees for the privilege. In order to acquire this whetstone, aspiring heads had to sacrifice and eat their oldest son (Harley 1941a:132–3; 1941b:8–9,13). Chapter heads engaged in similar practices. One of the costumes involved wearing a leopard skin and sheep horns (Harley 1941b:26).

Each *zo* had a small portrait mask worn around his neck or kept in a pocket that served as a means of contacting spirits and their power sources (Harley 1941b:11). Art motifs included leopards, snakes, lizards, turtles, spiders, and crocodiles (27).

A sacred box was kept by the Snakebite and other secret societies. Some of the contents of the sacred box of the Snakebite Society included needles, small masks, quartz crystals, bracelets, and horns containing medicines (Harley 1941a:106–8,139). Other paraphernalia, some of which may have been kept in the box, included razors, python jawbones, human skulls, horns, cowrie shells, brass and iron rings, mortars, and pestles (113–14). Cowrie shells were used for divinations at trials (Harley 1950:16).

In Nigeria, only secret society members were allowed to wear certain bird feathers (Talbot 1932:300). Bell rattles and double “cow bells” were used for initiations and other ceremonies (Talbot 1923:170). Human skulls were given to *Idiong* members and were considered as the abode of the *Idiong* spirit. They were required paraphernalia for all secret society members and they were therefore valuable (Talbot 1923:150,175). Tortoise shells were used for *juju* cures (Talbot 1912:55) and were also impaled in a row where symbolically “killed” novices were placed during *Idiong* initiations (Talbot 1923:274). Tortoise shells were also considered symbols of the earth and used as rhythm instruments. They were struck with sticks in *Ekong* ceremonies, a use which curiously also occurred in Apollo cults in Greece (Talbot 1923:182).

### Structures and Activity Locations

Initiations into the *Poro* Society took place in the bush “adjacent to the town” or a “short distance from the town” surrounded by high trees and a fence with outer and inner portals, although the society also had a small round house in town (see Fig. 9.1) used for meetings and temporary stays (Harley 1941b:13; 1950:15,18,28; Little 1967:118,247). A bush house was constructed for the leader and the *Poro* “mother,” while the neophytes built their own houses (Harley 1950:28). There were also huts for the officials and fences to separate

the common, chiefly, and 20 initiates (Harley 1941b:13). “The Sacred House in the town was a kind of holy of holies” where sacrifices took place, embalmed bodies and masks were kept, and where officials were supposed to be buried (although, elsewhere, they are said to be buried in secret places; see “Treatment of the Dead”) (Harley 1941b:18).

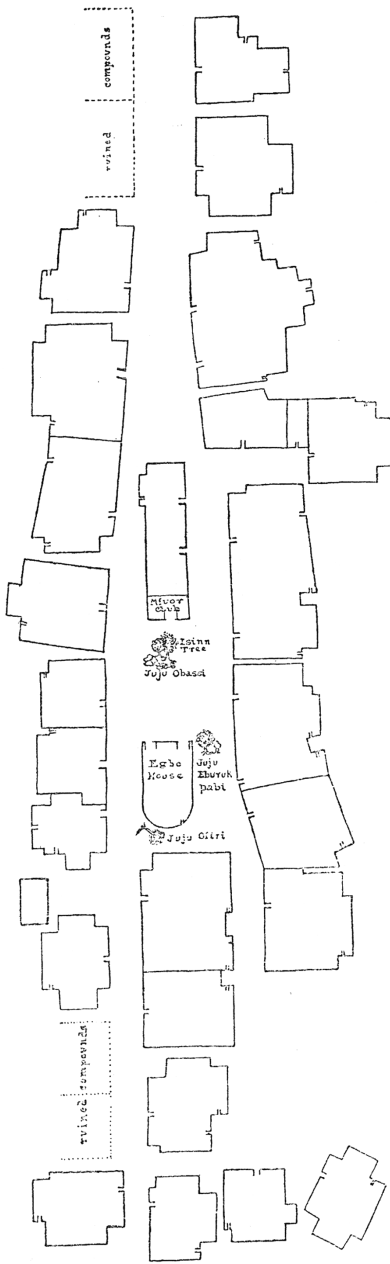
The *Njaye* Society had similar houses and bush facilities (Little 1967:249–50). The bush location was where all important society business was transacted. It had a clearing with four large stones where the founder was buried, reportedly with a male and female sacrifice. The founding of the bush location was also accompanied by a male and female sacrifice as well as a large feast (Little 1967:247). This is probably the same type of location that Harley (1950:18) described as a house in the bush for the main mask bearer, not far from town.

In Liberia, there was an official house for priests inside a fence and gate where *Poro* discussions by officials took place (Bellman 1984:22). It is unclear whether this was in the bush or in the village. Novices were taken to “a specially constructed village in the forest” that was fenced and where they stayed for four years in seclusion (9,80). A fence and small structure for female members of the *Sande* Society was located in the middle of town and guarded by *Sande* members (34).

Similarly, the Snakebite Society maintained a cult house in the towns where their sacred box was kept, but the society also maintained a screened clearing in the forest for rituals (Harley 1941a:105,108–9,113). The *Bondu* Women’s Society had headquarters that were “always in the bush, and known only to its members” (Newland 1916:124).

In Nigeria, the *Egbo* (*Ekkpo*) clubhouse “is the principal building in every town” (Figs. 9.2, 9.5–9.6) and housed an *Egbo* drum (Talbot 1912:39; Webster 1932:116). Such clubhouses featured a central cut stone projecting about six feet above the ground (the Leopard stone; Figs. 9.3, 9.7, 9.8) to which food and drink were offered. This stone was often painted to resemble a human body (Talbot 1912:40,171–2,264). This is reminiscent of stone pillars carved in abstract human forms at the Turkish Neolithic site of Göbekli Tepe. Little else was described of the interior of these clubhouses, although there are some useful photographs, drawings, and plans (Figs. 9.8–9.10). In front of the *Egbo* House there was a pillar with human skulls attached to it (rather like bucrania displays on ancestral houses in Southeast Asia) and a large pot for cooking sacrifices (Talbot 1912:257,260). The very powerful *Mariba* (Bush Leopard) Society had a small hut of green boughs in the bush with sentries posted to guard it (Talbot 1912:43). The *Ekkpo* clubhouse was in a small open space and was accessed by a narrow path (Talbot 1923:198).

The *Idiong* Society went to a sacred bush location for their ceremonies (Talbot 1923:172).



9.5 Plan of a village of the Ekoi tribe in Nigeria showing the central location of the *Igbu* ritual structure with an open dancing area in front of it and residential compounds lining the main road (Talbot 1912:266).

### Treatment of the Dead

The head of a deceased *Poro* member was kept by the society until the next death, and then it was buried with that person (Little 1967:250). However, Harley (1941b:7,9,31) observed that the high-ranking members of the *Poro* were ideologically supposed to be so close to spirits that they “never died.” As a result attempts were made to keep their deaths secret for extended periods of



9.6 An *Egbo* ritual structure in Oban, Nigeria (Talbot 1912:11). Note the relatively simple construction of this ritual structure compared with the one illustrated in Fig. 9.2. Archaeologically, it may be difficult to conclusively identify many such simple versions as ritual structures.

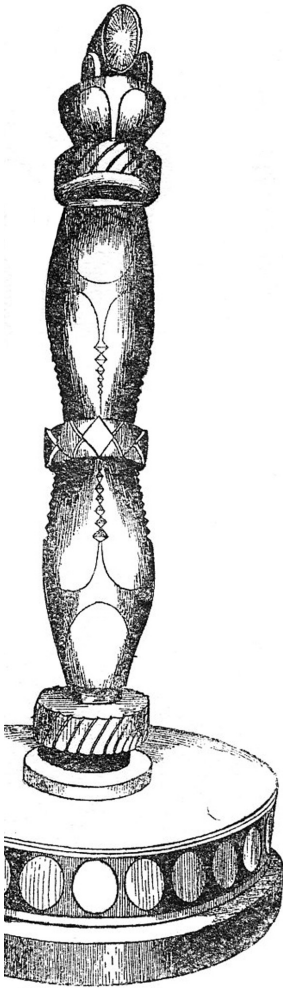
time and the “body was secretly disposed.” There were apparently no publicly recognized graves since the officials were supposed to be “spirits.” However, it was also stated that bodies of high-ranking individuals were sometimes smoke-embalmed and kept in the loft of the *Poro* Sacred House in town (Harley 1941b:7). Elsewhere, *Poro* priests were supposed to be buried in the *Poro* Sacred House in town (Harley 1941b:18). As previously noted, the founding of the bush location was the burial place of the founder accompanied by a male and female sacrifice (Little 1967:247).

All *Ekkpo Njawhaw* (Spirit Destroyer) and *Idiong* members had to be buried in secret places (Talbot 1923:184–5). In general “the bodies of people of importance are usually interred privately and in a secret place” (Talbot 1923:148). Chiefs were often buried in “a far-away part of the bush,” while dummies were used for their public burials. The bodies were buried in secret locations to prevent the theft of grave goods or the removal of body parts of powerful men, such as the skull, which could be used by individuals to supposedly increase their own spiritual power or to make fetishes for personal benefits (Talbot 1923:148).

At least for a time, chiefs were placed in a chair with a gold face mask, similar to those used in Mycenaean Greece (Talbot 1923:198). Alternatively, instead of burial in secret locations, or perhaps using dummies, the highest ranking *Egbo* officials and chiefs were buried beneath their houses and the secret society to which they belonged gave performances at their funeral (Talbot 1912:222–7).



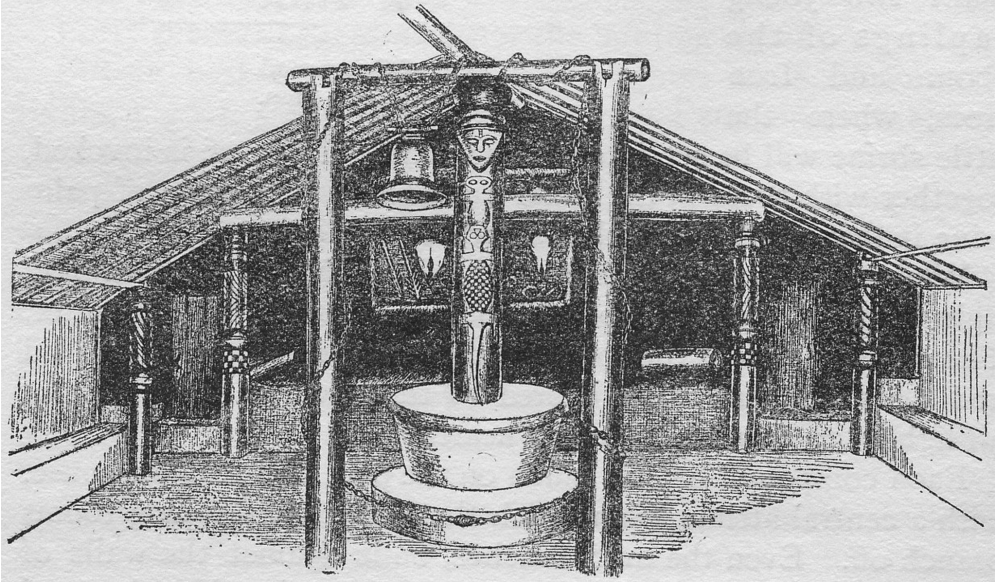
9.7 A stone pillar in an *Egbo* ritual house of the Ekoi tribe in Nigeria. Such pillars were “often transformed by rude painting into the rough semblance of a human being” (Talbot 1912:265).



In these cases, high secret society officials and chiefs were buried in shaft and corridor graves containing rooms with large amounts of grave goods together with live slaves and wives (alternatively the latter were simply killed; Talbot 1923:142, 152–7). Skulls, presumably of the men sacrificed by the society, were displayed on *Egbo* House pillars (see “Structures and Activity Locations”). Similarly, *Juju* men of renown and chiefs placed skulls before their doors and inside their houses (Talbot 1912:257, 261). Enemy heads or those of sacrificed slaves were plastered with mud and used in household altars as guardians or for *juju* (Talbot 1912:272).

### Cross-cutting Kinship Organization

Control of the *Poro* Society was vested in senior hereditary members, although it is not clear whether several different kinship groups were involved or only



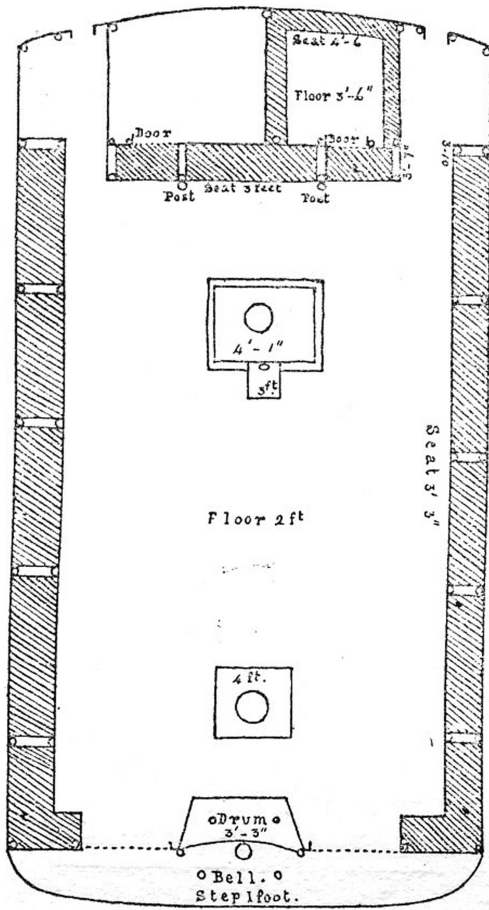
9.8 The interior of an *Egbó* ritual house of the Ekoi tribe in Nigeria (Talbot 1912:264). Note the human form of the central stone pillar accompanied by lizard and other images reminiscent of the stone pillars at Göbekli Tepe (see Chapter 10). Note also the carved wood columns, the benches along the walls, the drum at the back, and the apparent cattle skulls on the back wall.

one (Little 1967:240,244). In other parts of the world, hereditary positions seem to have been instituted to ensure memberships that cross-cut kinship groups. Harley (1950:vii) observed that high *Poro* officials were selected from two or three families of supreme hereditary standing in all of Liberia. The six other principal secret societies in Liberia were all voluntary and not based on kinship, although these observations were from relatively modern contexts (Bellman 1984:34).

### Regional Organization

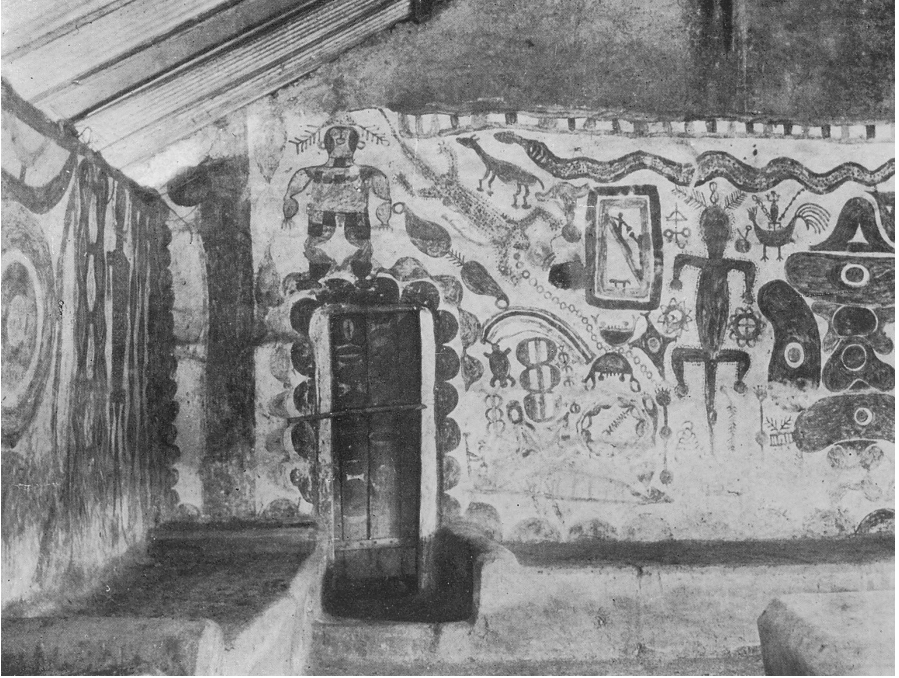
In the Mende region, the *Poro* was “the means by which a uniform system of government and set of customs was possible among the large number of politically separate and remotely scattered communities” (Little 1967:183). “*Poro* law surmounted the local administration of the chiefs” and it was “obeyed all over the country,” being used to resist British control over the area (Little 1967:183). *Poro* lodges were largely independent entities although *Poro* members were welcomed in all lodges (Little 1967:244).

The *Poro* organizations and power in Liberia often cross-cut linguistic, tribal ethnic, and political groupings with high-ranking members recognized in other ethnic groups (Harley 1941b:3,7; 1950:11,29,42; Bellman 1984:13,42). “*Poro* members can participate in discussions and rituals of any *Poro* group in each of the towns in the general area” (Bellman 1984:41).



9.9 A plan of the interior of an *Egbo* ritual house of the *Ekoi* tribe in Nigeria (Talbot 1912:264). Measurements in the plan indicate the height above ground level. Note the benches along the walls, what appear to be two stone pillars, and the apparent storage area. The structure is approximately 16 by 38 feet.

There was a paramount priest for a geographic area who resided in a main village that “all other towns in the area show special respect and deference” to (Bellman 1984:10, 13, 19, 26–7). The high priest of a region (the *gonola*) kept the most important mask and was the head of the high council. He was an *ex officio* commander of all the secret organizations of the region and the nominal owner of his clan land. He ruled over “lesser spirits,” who served as his messengers and henchmen, and he had the power to exile individuals or target them for slavery. He was the lord of the *Poro* and *Sande* Societies and the supreme judge in the clan. He used fines to feast the older men from all the towns of the clan (Harley 1950:11–15). Three such men received tribute from seven, seven to eight, and nine towns respectively, as well as taking possession of all leopards, pythons, and crocodiles killed in their areas, for which they paid one cow (Harley 1950:16–19). Elders came from Guinea to participate in Liberian *Poro*



9.10 The interior of an *Egbo* ritual house at Akangba, Nigeria (Talbot 1912:249). Note the plastered wall benches.

rituals, including the chief leader (*zo*) from Guinea who came for additional training (Bellman 1984:120,130,136–7). There was “a wide network binding all the priests together under a supreme council” (Harley 1950:vii). A similar regional organization under a grand council was reported for the *Poru* in Sierra Leone (Webster 1932:107).

In southern Nigeria, *Egbo* members “who dwell in far-away farms or villages, come back to join in the rites” held for burials of important *Egbo* members (Talbot 1923:166). *Juju* Cults resembled secret societies and may have been part of secret societies, although this is not explicit. In any case, Talbot (1912:49,141) noted that the more powerful *Juju* Cults were regional in extent, drawing members from hundreds of miles away. Similarly, members of the *Mitiri Dibia* “were the most traveled Igbo ... and were able to establish a Pan-Igbo solidarity,” while other secret societies provided each member with a “Pan-Igbo passport ... which guarantees him all perquisites and accords him a place of honor and dignity among ‘foreign’ associations which would otherwise give him a hostile reception” (Uchendu 1965:81–2).

### Power Animals

In Liberia, leopards and pythons were considered the most important power animals, the meat of which was suitable for consumption exclusively by priests



and warriors (Harley 1950:8). Other power animals included crocodiles, elephants, gorillas, chimpanzees, cattle, hawks, and hornbills (Harley 1941b:16–17; 1950: 36).

In southern Nigeria, high-ranking secret society members and chiefs could transform themselves into power animals by means of potions and hereditary secrets and practices – mainly into leopards, alligators, pythons, buffaloes, boars, and elephants (Talbot 1912:80; 1923:88,95). Vultures were viewed as incarnate ancestors and messengers from the god, *Idiong* (Talbot 1923:79,274). Various birds also featured in some performances.

### Number of Societies

In one Mende town, there were up to five separate *Sande* groups which often competed with each other (Little 1967:126). In Liberia, a village of 1,500 people had twelve secret society groups (Bellman 1984:19,29).

In Nigeria, Talbot (1912:37) referred to many secret societies in the region.

### Proportion of Population

All males in Mende communities were supposed to become *Poro* initiates in order to become full members of Mende society. However, there were subsequent grades or subsocieties that were much more exclusive (see “Exclusivity”) (Little 1967:120; Bellman 1984:8). While this may have been the norm, Bellman (1984:32) also mentioned that there were some people who were reluctant to join the *Poro* or whose families were too poor to pay the initiation fees. Although all Mende women were supposed to join the *Sande* Society, there were only between six and thirty members in any given group (Little 1967:127).

*Ekkpo* performances among the Ibibio sometimes involved sixty to a hundred performers, indicating a significant membership base (Talbot 1923:187).

### Sex

As previously discussed in the section on “Motives and Dynamics,” one of the main objectives of secret societies, at least those dominated by men, was to keep women and children terrified (Harley 1941b:18). Women who witnessed *Poro* activities were killed and eaten, although if they were rich enough they could pay a fine of three cows; however, they were then rendered dumb for life so they could not reveal what they had seen (Harley 1941a:127,134).

The Mende had separate societies for men (*Poro*) and women (*Sande* or *Bondu*), although some women, especially wealthy women and unmarried chieftainesses, could become members of the men’s *Poro* society, albeit only at a junior level (Newland 1916:124–5,129; Little 1967:245). In the Mano area, there was a prestigious and powerful Old Woman’s organization that was

supposed to identify malicious sorcerers (Harley 1950:viii). One special role in the *Poro* was reserved for a single woman who was considered the spirit patron's wife (*wai*). She kept some of the special paraphernalia as well as serving as matron for the initiates (Little 1967:245). In Liberia she cooked and prepared sacrifices as well as identified those who were to be killed for transgressions or bad conduct (Harley 1941b:8,12; 1950:9,11; Bellman 1984:30). In the *Njaye* Society, the leader was a woman who kept a sacred boa constrictor (Little 1967:250).

In the main warrior societies of Liberia, both important men and women could become members, although only men acted as oracles or became possessed by spirits (Bellman 1984:36). Similarly, both men and women could be members of the Snakebite Society, although there were few female members (Harley 1941a:105).

In Nigeria, women were excluded from the *Ekkpe* and *Sakapu* Societies, except in some old towns, and except for the wife of the main priest (Talbot 1932:300). Women were not allowed in *Egbo* Houses except to clean them (Talbot 1912:264), although rich and influential women could become honorary members of every grade of the *Egbo* Society. Nevertheless, they were not allowed to know the mysteries and were not considered full members (Talbot 1912:44). Women also had their own society, the *Ekkpa*, that was powerful and put on "maenad-like" wild performances during which men stayed inside. These accounts and practices bear a striking resemblance to the Dionysian rites in which male intruders could be killed or driven mad, as in Euripides' account of King Pentheus. For a fee, men could become honorary members of the *Ekkpa*, but played no ritual role (Talbot 1912:225). While it may have been true, as some writers have asserted, that some secret societies in Africa maintained men's control over women (e.g., Webster 1932:118–20), there was clearly considerable variation.

### Age

Mende girls generally underwent a symbolic initiation into the *Sande* Society between four and six years old and a formal initiation around fourteen or fifteen years old, but could join at any age (Little 1967:115,117,127,130). Boys were initiated into the *Poro* at puberty or before (118).

Infants could be nominally initiated into the *Peri* Warrior Society with the ritual consumption of enemy flesh being done in their names (Talbot 1932:303).

### Feasts

Initiations into the *Poro* among the Mende involved a feast in town during the initiations and a four-day feast in the town at their culmination (Little 1967:122,125). Feasts were also held in the bush school upon completion of initiations and after scarification and circumcision wounds were healed (Harley

1941b:22,29; 1950:30). *Poro* meetings in Liberia were always accompanied by food and drink served according to rank within the society (Bellman 1984:26), while there were large family feasts accompanied by visiting when newly initiated members re-entered their villages (Bellman 1984:81,131-2). Feasts were also held at the initiation of members into the Snakebite Society (Harley 1941a:106) and probably most other secret societies.

In southern Nigeria, there were feasts for the culmination of initiations at fathers' houses and in the bush schools. Feasts for funerals sometimes involved human sacrifices (Talbot 1923:159-67,175,180). The *Ekkpo* Society also held seven days of feasting with processions in the public square for harvest ceremonies (188).

### Frequency

*Poro* groups met "whenever necessary" without a fixed schedule (Little 1967:244). In Liberia, initiations were held every sixteen to eighteen years which effectively created age grades (Harley 1941b:3; Bellman 1984:30). The seclusion and training period for initiations traditionally lasted three to four years, or a variable number of months for girls in the *Sande* bush compounds, depending on the wealth of their family (Harley 1941b:27; 1950:vi). In Sierra Leone, the "bush" remained open only for four months of the year (Newland 1916:128).

Thus, West Africa exemplifies examples of secret societies that were powerful, highly organized, region-wide organizations. They were strongly involved in political decisions. They had a multiplicity of enforcement techniques including the use of terror and human sacrifices. They also provide some of the clearest documentation concerning the motives behind the organization of secret societies and the tactics that were used to achieve their goals.





PART III

IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHAEOLOGY



## CHAPTER TEN

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Reaction to evolutionism and scientific functionalism has very nearly amounted to a denial that regularities exist.

Julian Steward 1951:1

Given the relatively common occurrence of secret societies in ethnographically complex hunter/gatherer societies, horticultural societies, and even some chiefdom societies, it would make sense for archaeologists to stay alert to the possibility of material indications of secret societies when studying these types of prehistoric societies. I am not suggesting that secret societies should have, or would have, been present in all such societies. They were certainly not recorded in all ethnographic societies at these levels. Nevertheless, their occurrence is common enough ethnographically so that they may have been present in as many as 25–50 percent of archaeological transegalitarian societies. Indeed, it would be astounding if they were not common in many Post-Pleistocene cultures. Moreover, the preceding chapters have documented the distinctive types of ritual paraphernalia, structures or locations (especially caves and “kivas”), and practices that can be used to infer their presence archaeologically.

My aim in this chapter is not to make any unequivocal demonstrations of prehistoric secret society presences, but simply to point out examples of the types of situations where the application of the secret society model might prove to be insightful or productive. Some of the sites in this compilation

appear relatively compelling, while others may merely raise the possible utility of such an interpretation.

#### MATERIAL PATTERNS

From the preceding examples of secret societies, a number of material patterns can be proposed which should assist archaeologists in identifying the remains of past secret societies and their activities (see also Chapter 1). These can be briefly summarized as follows.

##### *Transegalitarian Societies*

Secret societies are strongly associated with transegalitarian or more complex societies, often becoming transformed into, subsumed into, or superseded by, official religions at the state level.

##### *Surpluses*

The high fees required for initiations and advancement in secret societies were predicated on the ability of people to produce reliable surpluses in most years. Indeed, one of the major purposes for establishing secret societies seems to have been the control of such surpluses. This could lead to unusual amounts of storage associated with secret society structures, although alternative strategies that are difficult to recognize archaeologically could also be used, such as detached facilities (e.g., granaries or storage houses), raised storage platforms, and systems of requisitioning from community households or other groups. Unusual storage facilities might also have been important for keeping ritual paraphernalia or costumes when not in use, although remote locations could be used for this purpose. In particular, where available, caves seem to have been some of the more common locations for the storage of ritual paraphernalia.

##### *Special Structures Used for Rituals within or near Communities*

There was considerable variation in such structures and their contents, with simple versions of ritual structures lacking many distinctive characteristics. In the American Southwest, Plains, and central-northern California, semi-subterranean earth lodges or kivas were the dominant ritual structures. Some examples were small and simple, as with the centrally located small cult buildings in West Africa, but others could be very large, for public performances holding from 500 to 700 people (e.g., on the Plains and in California). On the Plains, tipis (including large, elongated versions) could also be used. In Africa and Melanesia, secret society structures were much more elaborate and sometimes

larger than normal residences (up to 35 meters long). They were often built on stone-faced platforms, and they generally contained carved posts, modeled skulls, and/or works of art. In Melanesia, some rich men's houses could resemble cult structures (Speiser 1996). In a few cases, no formal ritual structure was built. This was only the case where residential houses consisted of large corporate residences that could accommodate large numbers of people, as on the Northwest Coast. There, and in some instances in the American Southwest and Plains, the corporate household of the principal organizer was temporarily tabooed and used for secret society rituals, public ritual performances, and the storage of paraphernalia. In California and around the Great Lakes, rituals could simply be held behind fenced areas in the open air.

Secret society structures could be multi-functional (combining uses as sweat houses, periodic residences, ritual centers, feasting facilities, and locations for various craft activities), or they could be exclusively used for rituals and the seclusion of initiates. Thus some contained cooking facilities, even multiple hearths, while others had none. A number of secret society structures had distinctive features such as stone-faced or plastered benches along the walls, an architectural design especially suited for viewing central addresses or performances. Other design features hid activities from public view by separating them from residential areas or by situating the structures below ground. Many specialized ritual structures could accommodate only a small number of people, although there were some important exceptions, as in Melanesia, California, and the Plains. Using the direct historic approach or regional ethnographic syntheses to interpret such structures, where possible, should be invaluable in helping to identify ritual structures. Feasting and/or dancing facilities (plazas or demarcated flat areas) or areas for public displays were often associated with secret society structures. Alternatively, special structures or large corporate residential structures could be used as ritual theatres for large numbers of spectators. Feasting and some normal meals took place inside some secret society structures as well.

Little ethnographic information was available on storage facilities in, or associated with, secret society structures or on food processing facilities (although for New Guinea, see Hampton 1999). However, some of the best archaeological examples include unusual volumes of storage features or food preparation facilities (e.g., Jerf el Ahmar, Keatley Creek, Puebloan kivas, Göbekli Tepe). In Melanesia, megalithic monoliths, platforms, benches, or stone walls/cairns were sometimes erected in association with the cult houses or dancing grounds and/or burial sites.

### *Remote Locations*

In addition to centrally located structures, there were usually, if not always, other locations at varying distances from communities where ritual training

of initiates, storage of ritual paraphernalia, and/or more exclusive rituals, discussions, and activities were carried out by members or the highest ranking members. These locations include a variety of site types ranging from simple meeting locations without structures to “bush schools” with temporary residential structures and bush dance houses about 200–300 meters from the villages (see, e.g., Chapter 3); from full ceremonial lodges (e.g., *Midewiwin* lodges in Chapter 6) to isolated camps, mountaintop shrines, and the use of caves for a variety of purposes. There were frequently remote seclusion locations for new initiates, either as individuals or as groups, within a kilometer of residences. Ritual or meeting locations were often sited near notable natural features in the landscape. All such locations were strictly taboo for non-initiates.

The use of caves is of particular interest owing to their enhanced archaeological visibility and their prominence in archaeological research. Caves were used as “shrines” and storage locations for ritual paraphernalia, as well as for special rituals such as solstice ceremonies, and for the seclusion of initiates. The ethnographic documentation of their use by secret societies (or any other ritualists) tends to be very limited, but the information that is available is extremely valuable and sufficient to establish caves as important locations for secret society activities (see Chapters 2–4 and 7). The nearly universal claims that caves were supernaturally dangerous places that normal people avoided (Clottes 2016:17,38) may be due in part to their use by secret societies for rituals and the taboos associated with secret society locations. As detailed in the following sections, some of the best arguments for archaeological secret societies come from cave contexts, whether in the Upper Paleolithic, the American Southwest, California, the Near East, or the European metal ages.

### *Numbers of Special Structures*

In most, but not all cases, there were several distinct secret societies that co-existed in the same community. Sometimes each major society had its own structure; sometimes several societies shared a ritual structure in common. Therefore, there was frequently more than one special secret society ritual structure, or remote ritual site, used by the same community, and they tended to be architecturally similar.

### *Ritual Paraphernalia*

The most sacred secret society paraphernalia was secret and hidden from non-initiated members of the community. Often, such society paraphernalia tended to be carefully curated and/or destroyed at the end of its use life. As a result, some of the material evidence of secret societies can be very thin, at least in community contexts. On the other hand, there were often remote caches



of ritual paraphernalia, especially in caves, where sacred paraphernalia might be recovered archaeologically. There were also some items like costumes and masks that were publicly displayed and might be represented occasionally in community material contexts.

As with structures, there was considerable regional variability in the nature of ritual paraphernalia as a result of regional differences in materials available and different cultural traditions. Nevertheless, there were a number of recurring patterns. These included the use of masks, quartz crystals and exotic shells; the use of spears or arrows; and the use of instruments that made unusual noises, which were claimed to be spirit voices, especially drums, rattles, bullroarers, flutes or whistles, and deep resonators like conch shell trumpets. It is interesting to note that, archaeologically, the earliest occurrences of flutes, whistles, bullroarers, and lithophones were from Upper Paleolithic caves in Europe (Morley 2013:117–18,126), and that arrowheads or spearpoints should be recurring types in artifact assemblages at secret society locations. Bullroarers were “one of the most widespread of primitive instruments” (a large number of examples were documented by Webster 1932:77–8fn).

The use of animal skins, presumably with claws and facial parts attached, was also common, as was the use of bird feathers, wings, and talons. Exotic materials or special stones were often attributed magical powers and used in rituals, such as the seashells and crystals “shot” into initiates, or the unmodified *Ganekhe* stones that embodied ancestral spirits in New Guinea and other locations. In the Americas, bone drinking tubes and scratching sticks or pointed bones were common paraphernalia used by initiates during seclusion. Staffs or sacred poles were also common cult items in North America.

Masks were common but not universal secret society items, although some special costuming or appearance modification appears to have been universal. The use of masks was sometimes depicted on figurines or in graphic iconography.

Decoration of artifacts could also be indicative of secret societies (see “Interaction Spheres”). In one case, Mills (2007) suggested that the shift from bold exterior motifs on ceramics to more intimate interior designs in the American Southwest may have been due to a shift from large kin-based group feasting and ceremonies to more restricted feasts and ceremonies that only involved small numbers of individuals, such as ritual sodalities. Also of potential note is the occurrence of bedrock mortars or unusual bedrock features in association with a number of archaeological ritual sites like Göbekli Tepe, the Ritidian caves on Guam, Natufian cave burial and feasting sites, and ritual sites in California, as well as the ritual use of mortars by the ethnographic Miwok (Chapter 3).

*Power Animal Iconography*

Iconography of power animals not only indicated an important ideological component of many secret societies but also could reflect individual roles within societies. A variety of such animals were generally present in secret society iconographies, but usually did not represent major animal staple food species – a feature that has often puzzled prehistoric cave art researchers. The most common power animals were carnivores, omnivores, or raptors, but large, powerful, and dangerous herbivores like bison, elephants, and bulls were common as well. These animals were often depicted in threatening poses. Other birds or animals as well as imaginary animals and abstracted supernatural forces, sexual motifs, and natural powers (e.g., lightning) also occurred but were less common. Ancestral spirits, or “ghosts,” were common ideological elements of secret societies, although these were often conceived of in animal or masked forms. The use of animal skins with claws may have indicated either identification with such animals or conceptual transformations into those animals – another common element in secret society ideologies and iconographies. Although not the focus of this study, another iconographic feature noted in passing was the frequent use of sexual motifs, especially phallic and vulvic depictions.

*Interaction Spheres*

As defined archaeologically, these involved regional or larger geographical areas, multiple cultural traditions or ethnic groups, and were typically expressed by common ritual or elite materials and iconography (Caldwell 1964). Since secret societies often exhibited these same characteristics, the identification of interaction spheres such as Hopewell, Chavín, or the American Northwest Coast may be another feature that can be used to infer the existence of prehistoric secret societies. Ethnographically, Speiser (1996) observed this kind of patterning in Vanuatu (see Chapter 7). The regional nature of many secret societies has been a recurring feature in the preceding chapters, as has been the emphasis on dominant power animals or abstractions of those animals in regional iconographies. These regional networks were probably due to secret societies exchanging or purchasing novel rituals or exotic materials to be used in their rituals, such as galena, quartz crystals, cowrie shells, mica, pipestone, copper, and similar materials. Such ritual exchanges plausibly resulted in interaction sphere stylistic manifestations.

Driver (1969:361) observed that the details of secret society ritual often reflect regional and pan-regional patterns. The details of sodality expression in any particular society “are normally shared with neighboring tribes, as well as with tribes in other culture areas, and must be accounted for by contact of peoples, diffusion, acculturation, and other historical processes.” In fact, it was surprising

to see some individual ritual elements appearing across large parts of the continent of North America, such as the “shooting” of special objects into initiates who then “fell dead” but were subsequently revived. The hanging up of people by piercing their flesh and inserting skewers with ropes attached is another ritual feature that occurred on the Pacific Coast and in the Central Plains, thousands of kilometers away. The occurrence of similar uses of tortoise shells in West Africa and Classical Greece and other unusual combinations of traits may be due to similar hyperfluid diffusion of ritual practices – a speculative suggestion to be sure. The ethnographies indicate that popular or effective ritual techniques easily traveled within and between regional secret society networks. In addition, the many “starter” secret societies that sprang up continuously all seem to have shared formats and ideologies that resembled the dominant secret societies of the region, only varying in the details of specific animals invoked or slight alterations in ritual practice, songs or dances used, and visions obtained.

### *Art Traditions*

In many cases, art used at ritual locations was elaborate and sophisticated, displaying considerable skill, training, and time investment. The occurrence of a sophisticated art tradition may therefore be indicative of secret society underwriting. Secret society art traditions were usually based on prior existing motifs and beliefs, but added new dimensions of meaning and new elements to those traditions, such as the occurrence of imaginary animals and ghosts or transformed therianthropic images. As noted above, such art traditions usually encompassed entire regions or larger geographical areas or cultural groupings.

### *Feasting*

Large-scale community feasts and performances were periodically given by many secret societies. Almost all initiations were associated with large feasts, perhaps dispersed among the households of initiates, or perhaps held at the secret society lodges. Ethnographic accounts are unclear. Smaller-scale feasts were undoubtedly held for members or higher ranks only at secret society locations. Remains of specialty foods (e.g., breads, pigs, dogs, or most domestic animals; see Hayden 2014) or drinks (especially alcohol), as well as food preparation and serving vessels, testify to feasting, especially when they occur in large quantities or associated with ritual areas.

### *Human Sacrifice and Cannibalism*

Although not universal, reports of human sacrifices and/or cannibalism occurred surprisingly frequently in secret societies on various continents (e.g.,

in Africa, Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest Coast). Such activities usually, but not always, appeared to take place in locations restricted from public view, although precise information was not always available. Sometimes evidence of sacrifice or cannibalism was placed on display, as with trophy skulls in West Africa.

### *Esoteric Knowledge*

On occasion, evidence of esoteric systems of knowledge could be represented materially in the form of standing stones, architecture, or notations, especially in relation to the development of sophisticated astronomical systems which were features of many secret societies (e.g., Hayden and Villeneuve 2011).

### *Ecstatic States*

Creating altered states of consciousness (ASCs) or sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) in initiates was very frequent, if not universal, in secret societies and could sometimes be inferred from material indicators such as rock art associated with vision quests and the use of dark, claustrophobic locations (e.g., caves), hallucinogens, masks, and mind-altering sound effects created architecturally or by playing multiple aerophones, such as horn or conch shell trumpets. Archaeological images sometimes also depict transformed mental states, while the recovery of cannibalized human remains implies the violation of normal taboos.

### *Age and Sex*

There has been considerable debate over the sex of individuals who might have painted or engraved images in the deep recesses of Upper Paleolithic caves. If they were made by members of secret societies, what are the probabilities that women or girls were involved in rituals in the caves, or even in the making of the images? Ethnographically, there was considerable variability in female roles in secret societies. It was very common for children as young as four to six years old, and sometimes younger, to become members of some secret societies, especially if their parents were rich and high ranking. It was also common for women to participate in secret societies in varying ways, although there was considerable variation in different cultural traditions. In some regions, women did not participate at all, in other regions they had a few, very precise roles. Elsewhere they participated as support personnel (cooks, singers, servers, courtesans) but not in important rituals, and still elsewhere they could be full members or have their own secret societies.

MacKenzie (1967:118–20) thought that secret societies in Africa operated to maintain men's control over women – a sentiment variously echoed in other areas such as California and Melanesia. Ruth Whitehouse (1992:152–3) similarly argued that secret societies in the Neolithic functioned, in large part, to enable men to dominate women. Some ethnographers have suggested that the general admission of females in secret societies was a recent development. For instance, Webster (1932:121) argued that “The admission of women is characteristic of the disintegration of the secret societies and of their conversion into purely social clubs or magical fraternities.” However, varying roles for women in secret societies seem to have been too pervasive an ethnographic occurrence to be explained on this basis. Overall, there does seem to have been an emphasis on men's organizations and power, with many secret societies having been exclusively male (MacKenzie 1967:15; Driver 1969:361). Where women's secret societies existed, they were always ranked lower than their male equivalents, and women's roles were generally of lesser importance where they were included as members in more inclusive societies. A separate study could probably be consecrated to unraveling possible patterns in gender roles in the various types of secret societies.

### *Special Burials*

It was very common for high-ranking members of secret societies to be accorded special mortuary treatments. Efforts were often made to prevent body parts from being removed as sources of *mana* by those seeking to increase their own supernatural powers. These burial practices again varied regionally. High-ranking burials often took place in either the main structures of the societies, or under cairns or tumuli, or in special remote locations. Of special note was the frequent curation of skulls from individuals of high rank, and in some instances the coating of the skulls with plastic media to give more life-like appearances, which were then displayed in ritual structures. Sometimes elaborate burial structures were used or shaft tombs were constructed as repositories of bodies accompanied by wealth and retainer sacrifices, notably in the compound of the deceased members. Few, if any, high-ranking members of major secret societies were buried in common cemeteries.

Although not specifically mentioned in the ethnographies, caves would have been especially suited for secret or clandestine burials of powerful secret society leaders. Caves were protected by prohibitions and, like other secret society locations, were portrayed ideologically as dangerous places. The archaeological occurrence of special burials in caves in Mesoamerica, the Northwest Coast, the American Southwest, Micronesia, Europe, and the Near East is otherwise difficult to explain.

## CASE STUDIES

Because my initial interest in secret societies was sparked by their possible role in the painted caves of the western European Upper Paleolithic (Owens and Hayden 1997), I have devoted considerable thought to those types of occurrences. It therefore seems fitting to begin this exploration with consideration of a few Upper Paleolithic caves. I will then consider other possible archaeological examples in later periods in Europe, including a number of caves, and from there proceed to examine potential examples of prehistoric secret societies from other geographical areas of the world.

### *Europe and the Near East*

#### **The Middle Paleolithic**

The stalagmitic circles far in the interior of Bruniquel Cave dated to 175,000 BP (Jaubert et al. 2016) provide the best candidate for some sort of exclusive ritual group featuring sensory deprivation and probable altered states of consciousness or sacred ecstatic states in the Middle Paleolithic. The Grotte de Hortus provides another possible example. This is an obscure cave 200 meters above the valley floor where sets of panther third phalanges were probably part of a costume. The occurrence of an articulated bear foot may indicate a similar use of a bear skin (Pillard 1972:170,174). The excavated occupation floor at Hortus was at the bottom of a narrow rock fissure totally hidden from outside view and so small that only a few people could have participated in any activities. It is worth considering the possibility that the shelter may have been used as a storage location for ritual paraphernalia. The occupation also included human remains from at least twenty individuals, with an emphasis on skulls (together with skulls of Alpine ibexes) as well as evidence of cannibalism (Lumley et al. 1972:616–19). Given the fauna present, the analysts felt certain that the cannibalism was not part of subsistence activities, but was for ritual purposes. All these features fit well with secret society characteristics. Use of other dark caves has been reported for this time period, including Arcy-sur-Cure, Cougnac, and Grotta della Barura (Lorblanchet 1999:76; B. Hayden 2003:101–3); however, indications of ritual use are less explicit than at Bruniquel and Hortus. Eagle talons and feathers appear to also have been used by Neandertals as part of costumes or ornaments (Radovic et al. 2015; Peresani et al. 2011). These finds hint at some kind of ritual practices similar to secret society organizations, but by themselves are not conclusive.

#### **The Upper Paleolithic**

At least in some cases, groups in the Upper Paleolithic using painted caves must have been small and exclusive. There was also good evidence of seclusion-like

contexts in caves where crude images occurred in places only suitable for viewing by one or two people. Following the initial suggestion that at least some of the most elaborately decorated Upper Paleolithic caves were used for secret society rituals (Owens and Hayden 1997), Suzanne Villeneuve undertook an analysis of the physical contexts of cave images in an attempt to determine the size and composition of the groups viewing the images (Villeneuve 2008; Villeneuve and Hayden 2007). We also examined the likelihood that Upper Paleolithic groups developed relatively sophisticated astronomical systems and calendars (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011). I argued that these developments are primarily understandable as features of secret societies in the Upper Paleolithic. In addition to these published results, a number of other factors indicate that secret societies were central features in Upper Paleolithic rituals, at least in the most prosperous and productive resource areas like the Dordogne and Pyrenees.

The factors of relevance are:

- 1 The occurrence of decorated caves in environmentally rich areas that supported high population densities and complex hunting and gathering societies with surpluses, wealth accumulations, pronounced socioeconomic differences, and sociopolitical competition typical of transegalitarian hunter/gatherers (White 1992:560; Beaune 1995:179; Mellars 2009:216–17; Hayden 2007).
- 2 Decorated caves seem to have been infrequently used (Beaune 1995:192,238; Clottes 2016:113,167–8), and not regularly used for events like tribal initiations that would have involved large numbers of people. In fact, Guthrie (2005:36) estimates that only one in a thousand individuals entered caves or left images. This seems exaggerated, but makes the point. Ethnographically, secret society initiations could take place at intervals of up to ten or more years, and new initiates slated for high-ranking positions were often given different training itineraries (see Chapters 4, 7, and 9). The notion that caves were used for tribal initiations has been rejected by Pastoors et al. (2015:562) based on the demographics of footprints and by Clottes (2016) on the basis of episodic use, the very young age of some of the participants, and restricted access.
- 3 Similarly, Clottes and Lewis-Williams (1998:20), like Owens and Hayden (1997:122,153–4) and Villeneuve (2008), have pointed out that some decorated spaces in caves were really only suitable for a small number of individuals, not large initiation groups.
- 4 The common presence of children has been documented in the decorated caves based on footprints, handprints, and finger markings, the youngest so far identified being a two-year-old (Sharpe and Van Gelder 2005; Pastoors et al. 2015; Clottes 2016:109–10). Based on the same evidence, both males and females were present at rituals in the caves (Pastoors et al. 2015). This age and sex profile for those involved in cave rituals matches the age and sex profile documented for secret society initiates (Owens and Hayden 1988).





10.1 Right: The “Sorcerer” from Les Trois Frères Cave in France (Bégouën 1909:305). Left: A sketch of an Elk Society dancer among the Ogalala Sioux on the American Plains (Wissler 1916c:87). While such similarities may be convergences stemming from a common general belief framework, the detailed similarities strengthen the impression that the elaborate Upper Paleolithic cave paintings (including mythic animals) were products of secret societies.

- 5 Various authors point out the very restricted nature of access to deep caves and cave art, implying or stating that access was exclusive and somehow related to the acquisition or wielding of power in Upper Paleolithic societies (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1994, 1995:19; Montelle 2004:147). Other archaeologists remark that these caves were probably only accessed by privileged individuals, and that they were probably painted by high-status families (Beaune 1995:238,274). From a comparative perspective, Wason (1994:150–1) concluded that restricted access to ritual areas is generally indicative of socioeconomic inequalities in a society. These are also characteristics of secret societies.
- 6 The cave iconography and portable sculptures (Beaune 1995:169,248) indicate that elaborate animal costumes and masks were used in conjunction with cave rituals, the most notable examples being the “Sorcerer” image in Les Trois Frères (Fig. 10.1), and the figurines of lion-headed men from Hohlenstein-Stadel, Holhe Fels, and Vogelherd caves with scars on their upper arms reminiscent of scarification practices in many secret society initiations. In fact, an image of an Elk secret society ritualist from the Plains (Fig. 10.1) displays an uncanny resemblance to the Sorcerer from Les Trois Frères Cave in France. Clottes (2016:35,157) documents other therianthrope examples. These images may also represent imagined transformations of secret society members into animal forms.

- 7 Cave and portable art does not focus on subsistence animals, but on power animals such as bison, aurochs, mammoths, felines, bears, rhinoceroses, as well as imaginary animals that are characteristic of secret society iconography (Mithen 1988; Beaune 1995:194,198–9,209–10; Otte and Clottes 2012:42). “Ghosts,” which were central to many secret society ideologies, were also represented.
- 8 There is substantial evidence for the development of sophisticated astronomical knowledge associated with the use of decorated caves. Some similarities are quite remarkable, as with the selection of caves with solar solstice alignments for decoration and rituals by the Chumash ‘*Antap*’ members (e.g., Condor Cave; see Chapter 3, “Structures and Activity Locations”), and the alignment of many decorated Upper Paleolithic caves with solar solstice orientations, including Lascaux and Bernifal caves in France (Jègues-Wolkiewiez 2000, n.d.; Hayden and Villeneuve 2011:347). The Blanchard plaquette also appears to record surprisingly sophisticated lunar observations. As in American West Coast secret societies, astronomical knowledge probably served as a basis for the arcane, esoteric secrets of high-ranking secret society members in the Upper Paleolithic (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011).
- 9 Caves were ideal for generating altered states of consciousness, and some of the smaller caves like Pergouset and Combarelles II appear to have only been used for vision quests that may have been part of secret society initiations for some high-ranking individuals. Vision quests were often associated with high rank (Schulting 1995:50–2).
- 10 Drum beaters, flutes, lithophones, bullroarers, and even two-reed types of pipes or trumpets have been recovered primarily from caves or burials (Beaune 1995:221; Peredo 1999:92; Otte and Clottes 2012:40,43–4; Morley 2009:168–87,106,126; 2013:41). In fact, bone “flutes are commonly found inside the decorated caves” (Morley 2013:126). These are all typical paraphernalia of secret societies used to represent spirit sounds, or at the very least they represent music which Morley links to ritual activities (Morley 2009:162,167,172).
- 11 A number of special burials occurred in the Upper Paleolithic that may have been interments of secret society leaders, including possible skull cults. The burials in Cussac Cave, at Brno, and other locations with elaborate grave goods provide marked contrasts with the vast majority of people who do not seem to have received burial treatment (Whitehouse 1992:161; Taborin 1993:306; Pettitt 2010:213; Otte and Clottes 2012:40,44).
- 12 As in the Middle Paleolithic, cannibalism was certainly present in these Upper Paleolithic areas and possibly involved human sacrifices, especially during the Magdalenian (Beaune 1995:246,251; Formicola 2007; Bello et al. 2011, 2015; Boulestin 2012; Otte and Clottes 2012:41). Again, the predominant, if not exclusive, evidence for cannibalism comes from caves where bone flutes also occur in abundance (e.g., Isturitz, and Le Placard; Morley 2013). These aspects also make sense primarily in terms of secret society cults. Villa (1992) has noted

the presence of human remains with cut marks or modifications in at least fifteen Upper Paleolithic sites in France, as well as the nest of thirty-three crania at the Early Mesolithic site of Ofnet in Bavaria. In fact, Pettitt (2010:216–17) stated that 40 percent of the human remains from the Upper Paleolithic exhibit cut marks.

- 13 The widespread similarity of art motifs and musical instruments from western to eastern Europe as well as the exchange of special materials over many hundreds of kilometers (Taborin 1993; Morley 2013:126, 129) is characteristic of the regional scale and networks of most secret society organizations, resulting in interaction sphere material expressions.
- 14 In some cases, such as Enlène and La Garma, there were good indications of feasting in the completely dark areas of caves and some of these feasting remains were associated with apparent ritual structures (Bégouën and Clottes 1981:37–9; Peredo 1999:34–5, 39, 40–2). Ethnographically, feasting in or near ritual spaces was a typical secret society activity.
- 15 Another factor is the high degree of specialization and skill exhibited by the principal artists. This level of skill must have been economically supported and directed in some way, such as specialized training (Clottes 2016). The artistic elaboration of many ethnographic secret societies provides an important model for this development.

Given all these correspondences with the material patterns of secret societies documented in the preceding chapters, I think that the more *elaborately painted* caves of western Europe constitute some of the best candidates for prehistoric secret societies outside North America.

Using this perspective, I found it very instructive to visit Lascaux and Font-de-Gaume, two of the four caves in western Europe with exceptional Upper Paleolithic polychrome art. In my personal view, there are several remarkable similarities in the way the art was organized in these two caves. First, the main chamber that one initially encounters (Salle des Tauraux in Lascaux and the Carrefour in Font-de-Gaume) is large enough for more than a dozen people and had some of the most visible high quality art. The same was true of Les Trois Frères Cave near the Pyrenees, although the chamber was much deeper than the others.

Second, extending off the main entry chamber in both caves was a narrow corridor with a small alcove toward the back with spectacular art evidently painted by trained and skilled artists. Only one or at most two or three people at a time could view the art in these small alcoves. In Lascaux, the Diverticule Axial formed the corridor leading to the alcove, and the alcove was surrounded by the “falling horse” frieze and the Red Panel. In Font-de-Gaume, the corridor was the “Galerie Principale” and the alcove was the “Salle des Petits Bisons.” In both cases, the corridors were spectacularly painted. At

Lascaux, this corridor was referred to as “prehistory’s Sistine Chapel” (Aujoulat 2004:90), a term that may be far more apt than originally suspected. In fact, I suggest that, in both cases, these corridors and their small alcoves were for the exclusive use of the highest ranking member(s) of the secret societies who went to the alcoves to commune with spirits, just as the Sistine Chapel was largely for the Pope’s exclusive use. A similar kind of main entry chamber together with a more private alcove with notable art for viewing by an individual or a very small group of ritualists has been proposed for Villars Cave by Villeneuve (2008). This same spatial logic was expressed in the ritual use of a cave at Santa Eulaia (Guatemala), where the deepest parts were the most sacred and only accessed by the highest ranking ritualists (Chapter 4). Similar patterns of spatial use occurred in Malekula where certain areas were exclusively used by chiefs and other areas were used for group dancing (Wilson et al. 2000).

A third similarity in spatial organization involves what I would call “graffiti” art. In Lascaux, as well as in Bernifal where Suzanne Villeneuve and I recorded the contexts of the parietal art, there were specific areas (separated from the main chambers) where exceptionally high densities of engraved images occurred that were often superimposed and usually exhibited crude, small, even scribbled, execution, although some more refined images were also present (Fig. 10.2). Many of these images were evidently made, and viewed, while in a squatting position such as is generally used when resting or waiting in traditional societies. The engravings would have been best viewed by the glancing light of a single flame placed on the floor or held to the side rather than by torchlight held at eye level. On the basis of the distinctive locations, the high densities of images, the crudeness of most of the art, the expedient nature of its execution (using any random piece of flint, bone, wood, or perhaps even fingernails), and the lack of regard for previous images, it seemed clear to me that these images were not made by the same individuals who created the painted images, nor were they made for the same purposes, nor at the same exact time. However, since they were so locationally concentrated in relation to the high quality paintings, it seemed that they were used in conjunction with whatever was transpiring in the main chambers and/or the private alcoves. Remarkably, no one has drawn much attention to the possible ritual roles or ritual significance of these concentrated images. Indeed, no one has tried to make much sense of them in terms of the activities that they represent. They seem to have been relegated to the status of curios in the cave art world, probably because they do not fit the current models of Upper Paleolithic ritual and art and because there are so many random lines. At most, art analysts have concluded that the superposition of images indicates that it was the act of drawing rather than the image itself that was of importance(!).

To me, the concentrations of these engravings constituted graffiti made by individuals who were told to stay and wait in given locations, probably because



10.2 Part of the dense panel of engravings in the Abside alcove of Lascaux Cave (Aujoulat 2004:152, Fig. 108). Note the strong emphasis on scribbling, the overmarking of previous images, and the generally crude quality of most images. There is little indication of any advance preparation for making these images, which could have been scratched into the rock face with any sharp object at hand (Photo by N. Aujoulat, courtesy of the French Centre National de la Préhistoire).

they were not allowed to witness some things that transpired in the central chambers. Perhaps they were made by new initiates in seclusion areas or by actors in ritual dramas waiting to make appearances in the main chambers. I have recorded essentially identical graffiti on the inside doors of elevators at Simon Fraser University, made expediently with whatever was at hand by untrained and mostly unskilled individuals bored with the slow pace of the elevator (Fig. 10.3). These graffiti, like their prehistoric counterparts, were probably the products of frustration at having to wait for some event. Some scholars have viewed all cave art as graffiti (e.g., Guthrie 2005:140–1) and much of it probably was. Half of all images in Lascaux are engravings on the small wall of the Abside (Fig. 10.2), and in Villeneuve’s study, 75 percent of the images were small and of “poor” quality, with 66 percent most easily viewed from a squatting or crouching position. However, it would be a gross error to conclude that the major masterpieces were nothing but graffiti.

The locations of the proposed “waiting” areas in caves varied. In Bernifal, they occurred in narrow passages well before the main chamber deep inside the cave. In Lascaux, they occurred in a small alcove, the “Abside,” off to the





10.3 Graffiti on an elevator door at Simon Fraser University displaying many of the same characteristics as the densely engraved panels at Lascaux, Gargas, and Trois Frères in terms of expediently made scratches, scribbling, overmarking, and generally crude quality. These characteristics may be typical of activities by individuals who had to wait in enclosed areas for events to transpire (Photo by B. Hayden).

right of the Salle des Tauraux. Its two walls are scarcely 3 meters long each, yet the jumbled mass of engravings on those two walls astonishingly contained more than half of the 2,000 images in the entire cave. There are other similar examples in other caves. In Les Trois Frères, a similar jumbled mass of superimposed engravings occurred in a tight passage where one cannot stand upright. The passage is located behind the image of the “Sorcerer” which dominates the major decorated chamber deep inside the cave. Another example of concentrated superimposed engravings occurred at the back of Gargas Cave in a “small chamber” called the Camarin, similar in size to the Abside in Lascaux. The Camarin contains almost 71 percent of all the recognizable figures in Gargas, again similar to the situation in Lascaux’s Abside, and like the figures in the Abside, the images were mostly crude and mixed with abundant scribbles. In fact, Barrière (1976:363–4), who documented these images, remarked that they “suggest in the strongest possible fashion ... black-board graffiti.” In addition, there were indications that the “Diverticule Final” in Font-de-Gaume may have been used in a similar fashion, since a number of engravings were recorded there; however, no careful studies have taken place since the earliest observations (Capitan et al. 1910:127–32). I suggest that all

these locations of concentrated graffiti were probably waiting places for new initiates undergoing ritual seclusion or waiting to be brought into the main chambers for initiation.

All of the preceding features and their inferred types of activities accord well with what is known of secret society initiations, gatherings, ranking, special facilities and rituals for the highest ranked individual(s), and the use of exceptional art in ritual places. One can certainly imagine a small group of secret society members occasionally entering the main chamber of a cave with several new candidates, creating strange sounds with bullroarers, flutes, drums, or other instruments, as well as singing and revealing secrets of animal ancestors or guardians, then sending initiates off to secluded areas of the cave while the leaders conducted special rituals in small specially decorated spaces for visions or other experiences. This sequence is similar to that proposed by Lewis-Williams (1997:828; 2002:267), but with a special focus on secret societies rather than shamans or other types of initiations. One unique feature at Font-de-Gaume is the remarkable decorated frieze of bison along a relatively narrow corridor leading to the central chamber. This appears as a procession of bison heading to the main chamber, and was undoubtedly meant to mimic the procession of ritualists (perhaps conceptually in bison form) entering from the outside, which members would view sequentially as they progressed inward.

Other possible indicators of secret society activities in the Upper Paleolithic of Europe include the apparent storage of raptor wings in caves or rock shelters, most likely as part of ritual costumes (Bouchud 1953; Solecki and McGovern 1980; Laroulandie 2003), a practice similar to ethnographic accounts from California (see Chapter 3, “Structures and Activity Locations”). In areas where there were no caves, small, isolated ritual structures such as the one at Dolni Vestonice on the Moravian loessic plains at 23,000 BP may have been used for secret society rituals. The Dolni Vestonice example had bird bone whistles, a ritual kiln, and possible sacrificial burials (Klima 1968; Formicola 2007). The elaborate mammoth mandible and bone structures (recalling the displays of pig mandibles in Melanesia; see Chapter 7) at Mezhirich, *c.* 14,000 BP, including painted images, ivory rattles, and perhaps other bone instruments, constitute other possible secret society ritual structures (Gladkih et al. 1984; Morley 2009:170).

### **European Neolithic and Bronze Ages**

Ruth Whitehouse (1992) is one of the very few archaeologists to have related the use of painted caves to secret societies. Her study focused on Grotta di Porto Badisco, a Neolithic painted cave in the heel of Italy. Her interpretation is remarkably similar to the approach taken in this volume in terms of the ritual characteristics of painted caves (difficult, private access for small numbers



of people, use for initiations of youths into secret-focused cults) and in terms of the role of secret societies in establishing political power. In fact, she argued that for several millennia, virtually all the cultic sites in peninsular Italy and in Sicily were for secret cults, and she included a number of Upper Paleolithic painted caves as well (Whitehouse 1992:149,161). Paola Villa (Villa 1986, 1992) has documented the practice of cannibalism at Fontbrégoua, a Neolithic cave in Provence which must have served as a relatively secret location where clandestine rituals could be enacted.

In Scaloria Cave in southern Italy, excavation of 1 percent of the difficult-to-access interior yielded the remains of between twenty-two and thirty-one Neolithic individuals strewn as a largely disarticulated sheet of bone commingled with animal bones, stone tools, and pottery (Elster et al. 2016). The evidence for defleshing is extensive, yet the analysts failed to consider that this could represent cannibalism. I think the evidence can be interpreted in cannibalistic terms, especially since some of the human flesh consumed by *Hamatsa* initiates was cut off from dried and preserved human bodies (see Chapter 2). Lower in the cave were *in situ* Neolithic pots still receiving water from stalactites, apparently as part of a cultic practice. Given the prevalence of cannibalism in secret societies and the use of secret places, this could well be another example of secret society presence in the Neolithic.

While many of the megalithic monuments in western Europe were likely related to ancestor worship, including lineage tombs, there are several monuments which may reflect the additional presence of secret societies. These include the exceptionally decorated megalithic chamber at Gavrinis in Brittany, which does not appear to have had a mortuary function, but was a different kind of sanctuary (Joussaume 1988:90,96,118). Patton (1993:113,125) suggested that it played a special role involving elites. Such artificial underground sanctuaries could only accommodate small numbers of people, yet had to have been built by powerful wealthy leaders with extensive control over manpower, who were able to decorate the insides with regional symbols of power including axes/maces, crooks, and solar symbols. These are common characteristics of secret societies. Of course, the other prime megalithic candidate for a secret society monument is Stonehenge, with its highly developed astronomical knowledge encoded in positions of upright stones and its manifest display of power in terms of its architectural achievements and possible human sacrifices, or at least specially cremated burials (Willis et al. 2016). If secret societies eventually competed with corporate kinship groups for political and economic power as suggested for the American Southwest by Ware (2014), it could be worth considering whether the demise of megalithic ancestral funerary monuments may have been related to the rise of powerful secret societies.

Caves continued to be used for some sort of secret rituals in the European Bronze Age, again sometimes associated with cannibalism. Boulestin et al.

(1996) reported a decapitation from the Bronze Age deposits in the Grotte du Quéroy in Charente, and the presence of disarticulation cut marks on a number of human remains in the early Bronze Age Grotte de Perrats in Charente. Nakovana Cave in Croatia was also a sanctuary from the Neolithic period until Hellenistic times. Although there were not huge numbers of animal bones, and no human bones, there was abundant evidence of clandestine drinking using fine ceramics around a unique phallic-shaped stalagmite 30 meters inside the cave (Kaiser and Forenbaher 2012). Bronze cauldrons were also apparently used in remote locations such as rock shelters (Armada 2008). These locations seem highly unlikely for the use of such large and valuable items unless quite special activities were associated with their use, such as ritual feasting. The relatively secret or private locations make it seem possible that these would have been ritual feasts associated with secret society rituals.

The exceptional burial of a ritualist in Tartaria, Romania (Merlini 2011) could have been a secret society burial, although many other lines of evidence would be required to support such an interpretation. The cultic buildings from Neolithic Romania (Lazarovici and Lazarovici 2010) might provide such support with more careful analysis.

Where caves were absent, a number of unusual structures may have served as cult houses for secret societies. The unusually large timber hall in early Neolithic Scotland bears striking resemblances to the secret society cult houses documented from Melanesia in terms of size and internal divisions (see Chapter 7). In fact, the excavators have interpreted these timber halls as cult houses (Brophy 2007). Another means of establishing a high degree of privacy was through physical remoteness which could be achieved effectively by locating ritual activities on islands or mountain tops. In the Aegean Sea, a number of island sanctuaries were established in the early Bronze and later ages. One of the earliest was at Keros which was on a hilltop (perhaps foreshadowing Minoan peak sanctuaries) on a small island. Keros became a regional sanctuary for rituals in the Cycladic Period *c.* 2750 BC (Renfrew et al. 2012).

In the Minoan Bronze Age, both peak and cave sanctuaries and shrines were established on Crete. Elsewhere, I have argued that these may have been secret society centers (Hayden 2014:319–22). In the areas around the shrines, excavations have documented large-scale, probably public feasting and drinking (there were thousands of drinking cups) and ritual displays, at least one of which was accompanied at Anemospilia by a major earthquake that collapsed the sanctuary and killed attendants who appear to have been in the process of sacrificing a young man on a stone table (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997). To summarize the indications of secret society uses of peak sanctuaries, they were certainly used by elites who invested substantial labor and materials into leveling bedrock, constructing sophisticated architecture,

and providing ritual paraphernalia including gold jewelry, stone vessels, and items with scripts. However, the three rooms at Anemospilia were relatively small and some were used for storage; thus the shrine buildings were only suitable for occupation by very small numbers of people. The peak sanctuaries were remote from residential areas. They were regional in organization; they involved large numbers of drinkers and were undoubtedly used for periodic ritual displays; they probably conducted ritual human sacrifices; and they seem to have played important political roles. They generally pre-dated the period of consolidated state palaces, and it seems possible that they played important roles in the formation of state organizations, or perhaps came into conflict with the centralized palace polities, much as suggested for secret societies by some researchers in Chapter 11. Palace leaders may have co-opted earlier secret societies and incorporated them into palace organizations where secret shrines existed and human sacrifices with cannibalism seem to have continued in secret (Warren 1981). Orgiastic trance dancing is also considered to have been an integral part of Minoan ritual and is depicted on elite gold rings as well as pottery and in elite frescoes which Warren (1981) linked to fertility rituals. It is also possible, as Loeb (1929:285; see also Webster 1932:189–90) suggested, that many of the Greek mystery cults like the Orphic, Dionysian, Eleusinian, Thesmophorian, and Isisian originated as – or continued to be – secret societies since they were voluntary, primarily involved elites, were internally ranked, employed masks, and featured altered states of consciousness, with death and resurrection being a major mystery or benefit of being initiated. Other authors have compared the frenetic dances of Dionysian maenads to the ecstatic dancing of women in some West African secret societies (Talbot 1912:40,225; Webster 1932:189–90). These are all common elements in secret societies in various parts of the world, together with the promotion of fertility for the good of the community.

The above cases provide examples of potential secret societies in European prehistory. My intention has not been to be exhaustive or definitive, but simply to show the kinds of situations where secret society models ought to be considered. Several further examples worth considering occurred in the Bronze and Iron Ages. At Aulnay-aux-Plances (Marne, France) and Libenice (Czech Republic), large enclosures, the size of Melanesian dancing grounds, were ditched and contained a few human burials, in addition to animal bones and possible human sacrifices (Davidson 1993:12–13). At Yeavering (Northumberland, UK), the only Anglo-Saxon ritual structure to have so far been excavated, there was a “huge pile” of ox bones and skulls left inside the structure and a “huge post” outside (Davidson 1993:22–3), reminiscent of bone displays and carved posts at secret society centers in Melanesia (Chapter 7). It can be observed that the Celtic druids were also predominantly an exclusive elite group that may have been hereditary and/or voluntary, and was ranked.

Members acquired secret esoteric knowledge through advancement and training. One interesting account also referred to their training *in caves* or in inaccessible places in woods (Cunliffe 1991:220), similar to many of the ethnographic examples of training novices for secret society admission.

Ritual organizations resembling, or derived from, secret societies may have continued to exist into nineteenth- and twentieth-century rural Europe. Groups like the Calusari in Romania and the Benandanti in Italy were voluntary hierarchical ritual organizations which purported to defend their villages against evil forces that sought to divest the villagers of harvests, well-being, and health. They had ritual secrets and various means of enforcement (Eliade 1975; Kligman 1977). The “dogs of god” (werewolves) and berserkers (who ritually transformed themselves into bears) may also represent forms of secret society organizations. In variously degraded forms, nominally ritual groups still exist to drive out the “Wild Man,” bears, or other baneful spirits from villages in many rural areas of Europe (Fréger 2012). Mummers enact the miracles of rebirth for their communities, and like most secret societies, exact payment from hosts. The ritualistic and hierarchical *charivari* organizations in Europe and North America may be other derivative forms of secret societies which employed various forms of terror (as exemplified by the Ku Klux Klan) and justified their actions on the basis of defending community interests and morality, but fundamentally acted in their own economic and political self-interests (Le Goff and Schmitt 1981; R. Hayden 2003).

### *The Near East*

Although almost none of the archaeologists working in the Near East have interpreted their excavated materials in terms of secret societies (exceptionally, K. Wright (2000:116) has discussed male “sodalities”), there are a number of prime archaeological candidates for secret societies, beginning in the Late Epipaleolithic and continuing into the Neolithic and probably later periods.

### **The Late Epipaleolithic**

One of the earliest indications of likely secret society existence comes from a quite small cave located high above a wadi floor and at some distance from any known settlement of the time. This is the Late Natufian site of Hilazon Tachtit, occupied c. 12,000 BP. The core Natufian sites in the region had rich resources, significant sedentism, permanent architecture, and a wide array of prestige items exchanged in a regional network that belie important inequalities. Thus, they constitute a prime example of a complex, or transegalitarian, hunter/gatherer society that could produce surpluses (Hayden 2004, 2014). While there was evidence of occasional use of the Hilazon cave, perhaps by ritualists, the main feature of this cave is the burial of an older woman accompanied by

the remains of a feast including at least fifty tortoise carapaces and parts of wild cattle and wild boar. Of further note were faunal remains of leopard, eagle, and marten – typical power animals – as well as an articulated human foot (Grosman et al. 2008; Munro and Grosman 2010). Other indications of human sacrifice have been recovered from Natufian sites (Hayden 2001, 2004), and, as we have seen, ethnographic secret society members in other culture areas often either engaged in human sacrifice or used body parts from dead individuals for various purposes. Evidence for human sacrifice is even more compelling in the following Prepottery Neolithic A period to be discussed next.

However, the fundamental question that Hilazon raises is why one single person, or even several people, were buried in such a remote, isolated, difficult-to-access location with so much ceremony. The vast majority of Natufians were buried at the major habitation sites, often under house floors. Why was this person so different? There are few compelling answers to such a question. Perhaps she was a shaman as Grosman and Munro suggest. They also suggest that the burial was a communal event orchestrated to maintain or increase social integration of a community. In view of the small, remote, difficult-to-access location, this seems highly dubious. I think it far more likely that she was an important member of a secret society (Hayden 2017). Society members in other areas commonly went to considerable lengths to secretly bury their most powerful leaders to maintain the fiction that they still lived, or so that their remains would not be pilfered for power amulets (see Chapters 7 and 9). It might also be coincidental, but several secret societies used tortoise carapaces in their rituals, even lining areas with them for initiates to lie within (Chapter 9). Turtle shells appear to have had strong symbolical roles in Mesopotamia (Berthon et al. 2016). All of these factors seem to point to the burial of a powerful secret society member at Hilazon Tachtit.

Elsewhere, at Zawi Chemi Shanidar in Iran, Rose Solecki (Solecki and McGovern 1980) excavated a single structure (perhaps the only structure at the site), with abundant remains of raptor wings. These may have been used in secret society rituals in a structure dedicated to society use. At the penecontemporaneous site of Hallan Çemi in southeastern Turkey, Michael Rosenberg (1994, 1999; Rosenberg and Davis 1992) excavated two semi-subterranean ritual structures in the center of the site associated with exotic materials (obsidian, shells, and copper ores) and prestige artifacts (e.g., decorated stone cups/bowls, sculpted pestles, notched talley stones, maces). As with later ritual structures in the region, they had benches around the walls, support posts set into the walls, paved areas, a plastered very clean floor, and power animals (aurochs bucrania, deer antlers, and a carving of a snake). One structure seems to have had an aurochs skull and horns hanging from a pillar. The location and distinctive architectural features of these structures recall kiva structures from the Southwestern United States or the dance houses of California, especially

in their hidden, subterranean aspects and their unusual architecture. Like these ethnographic examples, the structures at Hallan Çemi may have been used by secret societies. An Early Natufian structure at Al-Shubayqa-1 (Richter and Maher 2013:439) may also have been used for rituals since it had a paved floor, stone-lined hearths, and an essentially clean occupation surface.

### **Prepottery Neolithic**

The potential archaeological indications of secret societies in the Near East increase substantially in the Prepottery Neolithic A (PPNA) period (*c.* 9600–8500 cal. BC). Because of the major theoretical issues involved in the interpretation of Neolithic sites in the Near East, I will devote some discussion to related and relevant topics after discussing the key sites. Two sites, in particular, deserve attention: Jerf el Ahmar in northern Syria and Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Anatolia. At Jerf el Ahmar, Danielle Stordeur (2014; Stordeur and Abbès 2002) excavated several almost completely subterranean ritual structures in the center of the small settlement. Like the earlier ritual structures at Hallan Çemi, these structures had benches along the walls and posts set into the walls, as well as four bucrania of aurochs displayed inside, the aurochs almost certainly being viewed as a terrifying power animal. Images of other power animals are also present such as raptors, snakes, foxes, and scorpions. A stela was even sculpted in the round as a raptor (Stordeur 2014:30).

One of the structures had a decapitated skeleton lying prone in an agonized pose with her fingers dug into the ground in the middle of the floor. This was an event that occurred just before the structure was abandoned. There were also engravings of headless human figures on the benches, indicating that this was probably not a unique event. This impression was further reinforced by finding two human skulls at the bottom of post holes in the same building, as well as three cooked human heads in a hearth outside the building (Stordeur and Abbès 2002:553). It would seem that human sacrifices were par for the ritual events in the subterranean buildings at Jerf el Ahmar – a feature reminiscent of many ethnographic secret societies that we have seen. The ritual structures correspond as well to many features of Puebloan kivas both in terms of location, size, elaboration of architecture, décor, and circular subterranean aspects. While the storage facilities in these “communal buildings” have been interpreted as evidence for communal storage, it is far more likely that the material being stored was owned by a secret society and exclusively used for its feasts and rituals, or as its stored wealth and ritual paraphernalia. Much of the so-called “domestic” refuse associated with the structures was probably used for making ritual items as well as for preparing and consuming ritual meals. Similar structures were excavated at Tell ‘Abr from about the same period (Yartah 2005).

Göbekli Tepe is probably the most remarkable site from this period. It is situated on a high point in the landscape, far distant from any known

contemporaneous habitation settlements or water sources. There do not appear to be any recognizable or typical domestic structures at the site (Dietrich and Notroff 2015). It is generally thought that the number of ritual structures and the labor required for building them indicate that this was a regional ritual center used by various groups within about a 200 kilometer radius, an area where the iconography and architecture are relatively uniform (Schmidt 2005:14; Dietrich and Notroff 2015:86–7). Schmidt (2005:18) argued that such networks must have originated in the Epipaleolithic or earlier, which accords well with the above inferences about the Natufian.

As far as is known, the site consists exclusively of a number of elaborate ritual structures suitable for small numbers of people and composed of massive anthropomorphic T-shaped central pillars set in almost completely subterranean pit structures, with megalithic roof supports set into the walls and benches around the inside periphery as well as lime plastered floors (Peters and Schmidt 2004; Dietrich and Notroff 2015). The sheer monumentality of the stone supports and the structures conveys power, as do the animals that are sculpted on the pillars and in the round (predominantly raptors, aurochs, wild boars, leopards/panthers, foxes, scorpions, and snakes). The animal images often exhibit aggressive, death-related, or ithyphallic masculine features (Fig. 10.4), whereas the abundant faunal remains are almost entirely of ungulates including a large proportion of aurochs (Peters and Schmidt 2004:207,214; Dietrich and Notroff 2015; Notroff et al. 2015:42,44). In fact, female figurines that are characteristic of residential sites, and even female-related artifacts, are almost completely absent. Interestingly, different types of animals such as snakes, foxes, birds, and boars tend to dominate the art of different structures. This uncannily recalls the different animal symbols (especially birds and snakes) used by different *Suque* grades portrayed separately in different sectors of secret society structures in the New Hebrides (Chapter 7).

The T-pillars are generally thought to represent humans, or at least spirits like ancestors with human forms, since they sometimes have belts and arms on the sides (Fig. 10.5). This is similar to the focus on ancestors or previous title holders in many secret societies and similar to the central stone pillars (“leopard stones”; see Figs. 9.3, 9.7, and 9.8) painted in human forms and erected in some secret society clubhouses in West Africa (see Chapter 9). The abundant faunal remains in the fill of these structures have been interpreted in terms of feasting. Human remains with cut marks were also mixed with these faunal feasting remains (Dietrich et al. 2012; Dietrich and Notroff 2015:85–6). These obviously raise the possibility of anthropophagy. Such observations together with the remote location, the architectural and artistic elaboration of buildings suitable for small numbers of people, the wall benches, the evident control over labor and wealth, the emphasis on power animals or masculine





10.4 Some of the power animals represented on the monolithic support pillars at Göbekli Tepe include an aurochs, a fox, and a crane on the left side of Pillar 2 in Enclosure A (Photo C. Gerber, © The Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

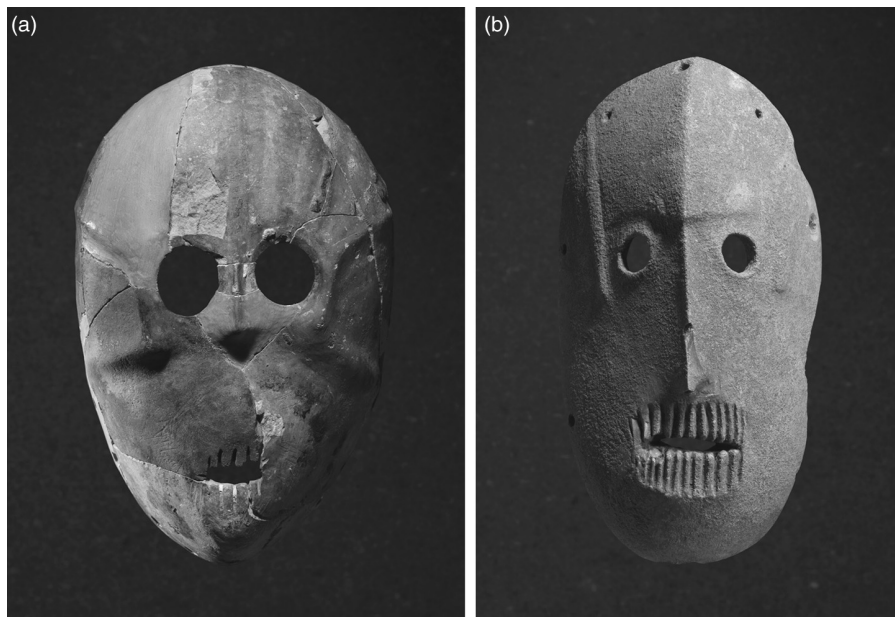
images, and the regional scope, all resemble common features that have been documented for secret societies. Even the circular seating arrangements inside the structures are reminiscent of seating in secret societies such as those in the American Great Plains and Southwest.

Alternatively, Schmidt (2005:15) and Goring-Morris (2005:98–9) have argued that this site should be compared to remote Greek shrines used by several villages constituting cult communities or *amphictyonies*. Unfortunately, there appears to be no explanation as to precisely what role these Greek organizations played, how they were organized or funded, why they were created, or why several communities would want to collaborate or invest considerable efforts in establishing such centers and participating collectively in rituals. It seems to be simply assumed that the religious urge drove them to such organizations – a far from satisfying explanation.



10.5 The major T-shaped pillars at Göbekli Tepe were clearly conceptualized in anthropomorphic forms with arms. Arms, hands, and elements of clothing on Pillar 31 in the center of Enclosure D reveal the anthropomorphic character of Göbekli Tepe's pillars. These recall similar anthropomorphic stone pillars called "leopard stones" used in West African secret societies (see Figs. 9.3, 9.7, and 9.8) (Photo N. Becker, © The Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

When we turn to the Prepottery Neolithic B (PPNB) period, there are many more sites that may have been used by secret societies. Three sites provide additional dimensions of secret societies to those proposed for the PPNA: Nahal Hemar, 'Ain Ghazal, and Kfar HaHoresh. The site of Nahal Hemar is a difficult-to-access, quite small, and low-ceilinged cave (c. 7 by 6 meters) located in the extreme desert well away from any contemporaneous habitation sites. The site was pot-hunted prior to rescue excavations, but excavators were able to recover a number of remarkable stone masks (Fig. 10.6), which seem designed to instill terror with their stony, malevolent toothy grins or deadpan expressions (Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988). These were part of a wider regional tradition (Hershman 2014). These masks have even been explicitly compared to African and Melanesian secret society masks



10.6 Stone masks from the Levantine PPNB period. A: Reconstructed stone mask from Nahal Hemar with radiating lines possibly symbolizing the sun (Collection the Israel Antiquities Authority Exhibited at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner). B: A large stone mask without provenience, but similar in style and material to stone masks dated to the PPNB (Collection of Judy and Michael Steinhardt, New York Exhibited at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner).

(Bar-Yosef and Alon 1988:Fig. 13.2–3; Hershman 2014:39–40,44). Other ritual paraphernalia (bone and stone figurines, special knives, bullroarers (labeled as “shuttles”), fragments of plaster statues, stone and shell beads, and unique textiles including cords knotted with loops) together with decorated human skulls (which authors compared to the plastered and decorated skulls of important secret society members in Melanesia; Hershman 2014:29) confirm the ritual use of this site at least for storing paraphernalia (Hershman 2014:12). If the goal of ritual was community solidarity, one must wonder why these rituals were so secluded or hidden, involved so few people, and included rather terrifying images. In contrast to the communitarian views, all of these features fit the characteristics of high-level rituals carried out by many ethnographic secret societies.

The PPNB occupations at both ‘Ain Ghazal and Beidha have ritual structures that are distinctly separated from the major habitation areas (across a river at ‘Ain Ghazal) and of small proportions suitable for substantially fewer than twenty people (Rollefson 2005:4–5,8). What explains these features? The standard view is that they were built to promote the social integration of the community (Rollefson 2005:5). Yet, their small size indicates that they were

not for the general populace, but for exclusive groups, and their isolation from the habitation areas indicates that privacy was a major concern rather than community involvement and coherence. These factors are more consonant with secret society characteristics of specialized structures near habitation settlements. Similarly separated small ritual structures occur at Jilat 13 (Garrard et al. 1994).

Like Göbekli and Nahal Hemar, Kfar HaHoresh is an isolated ritual center kilometers distant from the nearest habitation sites. It appears to have served, at least in part, as a special ritual and feasting regional mortuary center replete with plastered floors, skulls, and large-scale feasts (Goring-Morris 2005; Eshed et al. 2008). What makes this site a good candidate for a secret society location is its remoteness and location in a secluded context, its regional scope, the richness displayed in architecture and feasting remains, and the fact that the predominant burial mode in the PPN was under house habitation floors, not in remote cult centers or as secondary burials. This begs the question of how the individuals buried at Kfar HaHoresh differed from others and why they were buried separately. Given the use of plaster and the consumption of multiple aurochs, it seems most likely that they were from more important and wealthier families than most individuals. How were they constituted into a regional kind of organization that had special burial practices for members, or at least high-ranking members? Secret society types of organizations provide some of the few likely candidates, but such inferences would require other supporting indicators.

A final PPNB site that requires some comment is Çatalhöyük. As yet, no specialized ritual structures have been found there. However, there were a few domestic structures that were heavily involved in rituals including individuals buried in interior earth benches (Hodder 2010b:25–6). As Mills (2014:161) has pointed out, the interred individuals do not seem to have been related to one another. Therefore, the burials seem to represent not ancestor worship, but some other kind of suprahousehold ritual organizations, which Mills suggested were probably ritual sodalities like those of the Pueblos, i.e., secret societies. Aside from the burials, what is striking about the ritual evidence at the site, as well as the entire PPNB culture area, is the dominant motifs of wild, dangerous, violent animals, parts of which were incorporated into house structures and ritual areas at Çatalhöyük (Hodder 2006:29,163; Hodder and Meskell 2010:43–4,63). There are also depictions of imaginary animals similar to ones at Göbekli (Hodder 2006:142). The aurochs bucrania displayed in the ritual areas of houses could be from feasts held by the household or kinship group. However, outside of secret society contexts, the incorporation into walls of beaks, claws, horns, teeth, tusks, talons, and probably bear skins as well as the portrayal of leopards and other dangerous animals is difficult to reconcile with most ethnographic accounts of ancestor worship. On the other

hand, as Mills (2014:173) noted, representations of these same animals dominate many ethnographic secret society ritual spaces as well as likely prehistoric secret society ritual structures such as those at Göbekli.

Whitehouse and Hodder (2010:130) raised the prospect of “mystery cults” at Çatalhöyük, but did little to explore the topic beyond using it as a subheading and arguing for nebulous “low-frequency, high-arousal rituals.” Nevertheless, we have seen that on the American Northwest Coast and sometimes on the Plains, secret society rituals were held in the ritual areas of residential houses, and much of the iconography there relates to dangerous animals. In the Southwestern United States, as Mills has argued (2014:171), secret society shrines could also be erected in the ritual areas of individual residences (see Fig. 4.2). Pueblo communities also generally contained *multiple* round or *square* ceremonial kivas which occurred at similar frequencies to the “history houses” at Çatalhöyük (see the following section). The walls of these kivas were even replastered multiple times and were sometimes painted, recalling similar replastering events at Çatalhöyük. Thus, following Mills (2014), I think it is at least worth asking whether the ritual elaboration of some houses and the use of dangerous animal parts might not reflect the important role of the “history houses” at Çatalhöyük as residences of administrative heads in secret societies organized on a regional scale like those at Göbekli. It is also always possible that special secret society structures remain to be discovered at Çatalhöyük.

### *Types of Ritual Sites: The Evolution and Transformation of Secret Societies*

Bar-Yosef and Bar-Yosef Mayer (2002:350) have suggested that there were three fundamental types of ritual sites in the PPN: (1) regional centers like Göbekli; (2) unique buildings in the centers of communities like Jerf el Ahmar; and (3) remote sacred locations like Nahal Hemar cave (with the unlikely proposed functions of marking territorial boundaries!). An argument that will be developed in Chapter 11 is that regional secret society centers may have evolved into more complex regional centers with priesthoods, as exemplified by the Chalcolithic site of Gilat in the Negev desert (Levy 2006) as well as later Bronze and Iron Age centers. Levy (2006:82–5, 89–90) explicitly viewed big men as the creators of such centers in order to promote their political power, apparently using feasting and employing force if the maces and mass graves at the site are indicative of behavior. It also seems possible that secret societies could have laid the foundations for the Sumerian and Egyptian priesthoods (see Chapter 11). Indeed, who else would have wanted to, or been able to, excavate out of bedrock the remarkable ritual tunnel complexes in Egypt (the “Catacombs of Anubis”), well over a kilometer in total length (Nicholson et al. 2015), that bear a striking similarity to the passages at Chavín de Huántar?



### The Egalitarian Question

One of the pivotal and perennial points of argument in Near Eastern archaeology is the degree to which PPN, and even Natufian, communities were egalitarian or non-egalitarian. Those favoring a view of the Epipaleolithic and PPN communities as fundamentally, or even “very,” egalitarian include Hodder (2006:98,178; 2010a:352; Hodder and Meskell 2010:49; Hodder and Pels 2010:179), Belfer-Cohen (1995:15–16), Byrd and Monahan (1995:274,280–3), and Kuijt (1996:331–2). The only concession that Hodder (2006:179–80,183–4) has been willing to make in the face of evidence for differences in houses (which he claims are minimal) was that social differences at Çatalhöyük “only concern the control of knowledge about symbolism and beliefs, about the right ways of doing things, about how to perform rituals, and how to depict scenes, myths and histories ... revelation of such knowledge lay at the basis of much social difference.” Ritual performance provided the “main struts of social difference.” “Much of the variation in elaboration of buildings, and in the number of burials, relates to the ability of household members (perhaps especially the elders) to mobilize ritual, symbols, revelation and their performance” (Hodder 2006:183). “It was through the revelation of such ties and associated mysteries that some degree of status was maintained” (183). “It was through the performance of revelation in the house that social groups were able to ... sustain some degree of dominance” (184). Economics and politics played little if any role in Hodder’s view.

In contrast, Wright (1978), Henry (1989:206,209), Wason (1994), Bar-Yosef and Bar-Yosef Mayer (2002:353), Peters and Schmidt (2004:213), Willcox (2005:539–40), Testart (2006:50), Stordeur (2014:43–4), Ozdogon (2015:26), and myself (Hayden 2004:280–7; 2014) view the PPN, and even Natufian communities, as relatively complex with fairly pronounced economically-(surplus-)based inequalities, as reflected in the presence of recurring prestige items, including the remarkable hafted daggers and polished obsidian mirrors at Çatalhöyük, not to mention shells from the Red and Mediterranean Seas, small plastered buildings suitable only for small exclusive events generally involving six to twenty individuals (Verhoeven 2002:245–8), evidence for human sacrifices (Hayden 2001:198–201; 2004:284), and graves even of children with large numbers of shell or stone beads (Hodder 2006:191,229). There are also a number of indications that warriors were major factors in PPN societies (see “Violence”). This in turn implies highly developed sexual inequalities (Divalle and Harris 1976), as well as highly ranked men’s roles.

### Violence

Given the frequent ethnographic association of secret societies with warrior cults, violent manifestations of the supernatural, and battle talismans, it is not surprising to find maces (e.g., at Hallan Çemi), human sacrifices,

elaborate grooved stones (arrow straighteners), increases in projectile points when wild animals became scarce (Hodder and Meskell 2010:60), a remarkable expansion of PPNB populations, and the depiction of predatory animals or raptors, together with bulls and headless bodies, in the context of “communal” buildings that I suggest were used for secret society rituals. Indeed, Cauvin (2000) characterized the PPN as the culture of the bull, with a special focus on the bull as an aggressive, dangerous animal, probably related to warrior roles. Hodder (2010a: 342–9; 2010b: 23; Hodder and Meskell 2010:46,54) recognized the theme of violence and death in the symbolism at Çatalhöyük as well as regionally, but somehow never connected the dots to actual behavior, seeming to want to sanitize the past or view these manifestations by keeping them in the symbolic realm as a means of transcendence to spiritual realms linked to social history, or defusing social conflicts, rather than promoting berserker types of altered states and physical conflicts (Hodder 2010a:342–3). Hodder has studiously ignored any discussion of the possibility of human sacrifice, despite the commingling of disarticulated human bones with faunal food remains and refuse (Hodder and Meskell 2010:53; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:137), and the incorporation of three infants under the doorsill of one house at Çatalhöyük, as well as heads of other individuals under the main support posts (Hodder and Meskell 2010:53; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:129). Such practices recall the Mayan practice that I and others recorded of sacrificing a chicken or sheep to bury in a new house in order to make the house a living entity and give it a soul. It seems highly unlikely that three infants died all at the same time, at the very moment the doorsill was being laid. Rather, they make more sense as sacrifices ostensibly meant to give the building a soul. Other bodies were buried in the foundations of other houses as well. The frequency of violent trauma in skeletal remains has been downplayed by Hodder, from estimates of 27 percent displaying headwounds and 7 percent displaying parry fractures (Wason 1994:157) to “few indications” of these injuries and “nonviolent lives” (Hodder 2010a:343). Indeed, it would seem anomalous for a large site like Çatalhöyük to be so non-violent when the regional tradition involved human sacrifice, as shown at Jerf el Ahmar and other sites like Çayönü (Testart 2006:52; Verhoeven 2002:239), a tradition which probably extended back into Natufian times (B. Hayden 2003, 2004). Moreover, at least some of the skulls used in the “history houses” at Çatalhöyük may have been battle trophies or sacrificial victims as Testart (2006:52; 2008) has cogently argued. I have presented additional evidence for warrior cults and violence elsewhere in the PPN (B. Hayden 2003).

### **Lime Plaster Floors and Destruction**

Plastered floors (or flagstone pavements), lack of debris on floors, and purposeful destruction of ritual structures by burning or infilling seem characteristic of



many ritual structures in the Near East (Rollefson 2005:5–6). Because lime plaster is labor intensive to make, plastered floors have generally been viewed as expressions of wealth and prosperity (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2010:75). However, before the emergence of plastering in residences, a reasonable argument can probably be made that lime plaster was first developed and used in the Near East as a special feature for ritual buildings or facilities such as those at Hallan Çemi, Jerf el Ahmar, and Kfar HaHoresh. Secret societies would certainly be able to commandeer exceptional resources and labor to construct labor-intensive, elaborate facilities (San José Mogoté in Oaxaca, Mexico, constitutes a similar occurrence). Only after more surpluses were produced, and people felt social pressures to live up to aggrandizer notions of respectability, was the practice probably adopted first by the more affluent and then by larger portions of the population.

### Causal Models

Of some importance has been the strong tendency of archaeologists in the Near East to interpret almost all evidence for ritual, cult structures, and even remote cult sites, whether in the Natufian or PPN, as responses to social scalar stresses engendered by the increasing sizes of settlements (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989:488–90; 1991:189; 2002:60; Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2003:77; 2008:273–4; Kuijt 1996:317–19, 322, 330–1; Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris 2013:553; Grosman and Munro 2016). In these communitarian views, ritual served primarily to create social solidarity and reduce scalar social stresses in communities and residences that were growing in size. This stands in stark contrast to the ethnographic dynamics of secret societies documented in this book, in which claims to ritual knowledge were largely used to *increase* socioeconomic inequalities and in which secret societies were fraught with competition for power and wealth.

Cognitive explanations have also attracted some recent proponents. Like Cauvin (1978, 2000) and Warburton (2005:45–6), Hodder (2006:183; 2010a:353; 2010b:25–6; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:142) has argued that symbolism and ritual change resulted in social and then economic change, in contrast to materialist and Marxist models in which changes in economics or material conditions resulted in changes to society and religion. Given Hodder's premise, he has been more or less obligated to maintain that there were no significant inequalities or economic innovations before the change in ritual beliefs and praxis took place, and that food production played no role in status differences (Hodder 2006:183; Hodder 2010a:340, 348, 353; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:142). Contra a growing consensus, Hodder has insisted that even PPNB communities like Çatalhöyük were “very egalitarian” (Hodder 2010a:352), and he has refused to acknowledge the possibility of human sacrifices in the PPN or earlier since these would imply significant inequalities. Similarly, he warned

of “the danger that the interpretations will become ‘infected’ with the cross-cultural model” (Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:140) and expressed discomfort that his claims for Çatalhöyükian society “contrast to many of the historical or ethnographic examples” (Hodder 2010a:352). Clearly, he realized that the egalitarian view of PPN society on which his primacy of ritual and symbolism has depended did not accord with ethnographic reality as graphically documented in the preceding chapters (see also Hayden 2014). The almost obsessive emphasis expressed by Hodder (2006:104,106,109,135,138,164–5,167,187,214,219,228,246) on the role of rules in governing behavior – and especially the supposed role of architecture in creating rule-bound behavior – was also related to his premise that symbolism (in architecture and other media) and ritual factors were the main ones that governed behavior, a notion that simply does not accord with ethnographic reality as demonstrated in this volume (see also Harris 1979; Adams 2005).

In contrast to Hodder’s views, I have argued that economic productivity and security for the general population originally enabled ambitious men to operate with impunity, employing various strategies to enhance their own benefits. The most effective of these strategies were based on the production and use of surplus food. Initially, it may have only been the ambitious, aggrandizing individuals who were motivated to use surpluses for their own benefit, but subsequently others who did not want to be disenfranchised, or who wanted the same benefits for themselves, also pushed to produce and control more surpluses whether via feasts, marriages, funerals, rituals, or other strategies that relied on surpluses.

### **The Role of Ritual**

The standard archaeological explanatory model used in the Near East and elsewhere has been that ritual and religion served as the social “glue” that held societies together, an idea going back to Durkheim and Weber. While such a view has been considered problematical (Verhoeven 2002:245) and largely discredited according to Watkins (2005), it continues to be widely employed in archaeology (see preceding section). Verhoeven (2002:245–8) thought that the small size and duplicated types of ritual structures were particularly incompatible with any proposed social integrative functions. Indeed, if the secret society interpretation of PPN semi-subterranean structures, sacrifices, caves, burial areas, and remote regional sanctuaries is apt, then the material manifestations of organized ritual and religion would have been anything but socially cohesive for the community. Secret society rituals would have created more pronounced socioeconomic inequalities, they would have terrorized parts of the communities – recall the stone masks at Nahal Hemar and widespread indications of human sacrifices – and they would have created deep competitive divisions within communities.

One of the problems with the scalar stress and social stress models that hold people together through integrative rituals is that these models assume that there is no motive for people to stay together. They are simply forced to live together as a result of population increases or settlement amalgamation due to climate deterioration, and have to resolve the resultant conflicts. However, an alternative view is that people congregated together because they were attracted to sources of wealth and prospects of improved lifestyles. In such a case, there was no scalar stress and no need for social glue or community-integrative rituals. The people who controlled the wealth and power in communities were in positions to impose cooperation and rules of behavior on their own terms, and people with hopes of sharing that wealth or power simply had to comply. These are the perspectives favored by political ecological models.

### *Southwestern United States*

Aside from Europe and the Near East, some of the strongest cases for the existence of prehistoric secret societies occur in the American Southwest. Here, there is the important advantage of having secret societies ethnographically documented as part of a continuous cultural tradition, the material characteristics of which can be traced back into earlier prehistoric periods using the direct historic approach. In the Southwest tradition, there are four archaeological manifestations that pertain to secret societies: kivas, shrines, caves, and regional “great houses.”

The first and most obvious are the kivas, which were associated with secret society groups often referred to as “sodalities.” In earlier times, kivas were relatively numerous. For instance, at Long House there were 21 kivas among 150 rooms, many of which were too small for habitation and were probably used for storage (Cattanch 1980). While this number of secret societies has been recorded for some culture areas (e.g., the Northwest Coast and Melanesia), it is often assumed that the early small “lineage kivas” represented corporate descent group ritual functions rather than secret societies and gradually became differentiated from normal residential pithouse dwellings (Ware 2014:97), with secret society affiliations emerging later when there were only a few larger kivas in each community (Lipe 1989:64). It should be noted that some of the kivas in the Western Pueblos had square floor plans like Pueblo residential structures, but with wall benches or platforms plus features oriented to the cardinal directions, and walls that were replastered up to a hundred times, with about a fifth of the renewed walls being painted (Smith 1972:115). As with early Near Eastern ritual structures, there were also pilasters set into the walls (Smith 1972). Some of the similarities of Southwestern kivas to the “history houses” at Çatalhöyük are remarkable, especially considering the ratio of kivas

to normal structures compared with the ratio of “history houses” to normal houses at Çatalhöyük.

### Caves

A major aspect of the Southwestern archaeological record is the potential role of cave sanctuaries in the rituals of secret societies (Nicolay 2012:171). The ritual use of caves is an important part of the archaeological record that has been poorly integrated into overall models of ritual behavior, other than by references to pilgrimages and use by ritual leaders. Ellis and Hammack (1968:30) note that “caves in this pattern have been little recognized by anthropologists because Pueblos are secretive about the subject.” However, as we have seen in other culture areas such as California, caves in the Southwest were often used by secret societies for holding some of their most important rituals as well as for storing ritual paraphernalia in remote areas, including scalps, nets, and war or hunting paraphernalia (Nicolay 2012:175–6).

Up until now, archaeologists do not seem to have made the connection between secret societies which held public rituals in the communities and the use of caves or other remote locations for more clandestine rituals by secret society members. Yet this is a recurring ethnographic pattern for secret societies. As John Ware (personal communication) has indicated, “the Pueblo world is dotted with shrines located along trails, on hill and mountain tops, and sometimes in caves, often miles away from habitations.” Nicolay (2008) noted that Katsina ceremonialists used caves for blessing crops and dealing with enemies, and that cave shrines occurred from late Archaic times and were considered as sources of rain. Child sacrifices were sometimes made by rain or maize cults, and caves were used as meeting places by ceremonialists for blessing crops or to magically defend against enemies or attack them (Nicolay 2012) – all typical activities of ethnographic secret societies. A number of archaeologically documented caves have been interpreted as used exclusively for ritual purposes given the lack of domestic artifacts or architecture and the occurrence of “typical ceremonial cave assemblages” (Nicolay 2012:172). There are undoubtedly many ritual caves that have been plundered by pothunters, as can be appreciated from the many private collections in the region. Nevertheless, Cosgrove (1947:168) observed that “In the Upper Gila many caves were utilized as shrines by the Pueblo.” Among those well documented were:

- Feather Cave, where an inner chamber, accessed by a small crawlway (“probably entered only by important religious leaders”; Ellis and Hammack 1968:36), contained pictographs, miniature and full-sized bows and arrows, numerous feathers, corn cobs, markings that “may have indicated identification ... of religious societies” (Ellis and Hammack 1968:29), prayer sticks dedicated to the sun, and various objects thrust into rock crevices.

- Mantle Cave (Colorado), which had fifty large storage cists with ritual objects including a flicker feather headdress with 370 feathers from at least sixty birds, a deer scalp headdress, and a high quality ceremonial bifacial knife. There was no indication of residential habitation (Sommer 2006:213–18).
- Ceremonial Cave, which contained turquoise mosaics, pendants, ceremonial staffs, gypsum beads, and an estimated 1,200 sandals from ritualists likely observing solstice ceremonies (Cosgrove 1947; Teague and Washburn 2013). There was also an adult burial and several disarticulated human bones in the deposits.
- Doolittle Cave, which had pictographs and quantities of turquoise beads and ceremonial wood objects from Pueblo III times (Cosgrove 1947).
- Bonita Creek and Laguna Creek Caves, which yielded a wooden sunflower as well as bird and other ceremonial caches (Wasley 1962).

Ellis and Hammack (1968:37–9) cite a number of other similar caves, noting that “A great many ceremonial caves are known for Mogollon culture, and their contents are surprisingly consistent” (Ellis and Hammack 1968:37; Nicolay 2012).

It is reasonable to assume that the ritualists who used these caves were the leaders of secret societies. Aside from the use of caves as part of secret society ceremonialism, there appear to be few other scenarios that fully explain ritual cave use other than popular pilgrimage visits to caves as a result of general beliefs about the supernatural connections inherent in them. However, the underlying logic of pilgrimages is not well explained in any archaeological models. Appeals to popular pilgrimages may account for some material remains but there are other problematical aspects. People, in general, would not be expected to go to locations considered dangerous, nor would they be expected to leave unusually valuable materials such as flicker feather mantles. Moreover, popular pilgrimages to caves do not match the ethnographic accounts of uses by secret societies, the storage of ritual paraphernalia in caves, and the posting of guards (see Chapter 4). These considerations make it unlikely that popular pilgrimage models account for the ritual use of caves archaeologically.

### **Shrines**

Ritual caves were generally considered as types of shrines, although they often did not seem to have been formally arranged. Few other shrines in landscapes have been identified archaeologically, the most notable one being at Fajada Butte where the sun illuminated engraved spirals on solstices and equinoxes (Sofaer et al. 1979). Within the Pueblos, elaborate wood and sand shrines or altars have been described ethnographically in some houses (see Fig. 4.2; also Stevenson 1894; Vivian et al. 1978). The archaeological occurrence of shrines or paraphernalia in “residential” rooms might be indicative either of the residence of a high-ranking secret society member or of rooms used by secret societies

for some of their rituals (Vivian et al. 1978:40–2,62). Ware (2014:xv–xvi) also described a ritual assemblage including gypsum plaster masks and many other ritual items from a small store room at the late prehistoric Pueblo site of San Lazaro.

### **Great Houses**

The other class of possible archaeological remains related to secret societies are the Chacoan “great houses” such as Pueblo Bonito. Great houses generally exhibit the following characteristics: “larger building size and labor investment than contemporary structures within its community, multistoried construction, symmetry of layout, evidence of planning in the form of large-scale foundation units, core-and-veneer wall construction, and banded masonry” (Mills 2002:81). The great houses of Chaco Canyon have been explicitly linked to prehistoric regional sodality organizations and their ability to control labor to construct impressive architecture aligned to the cosmos which was meant to awe and impress people, as was characteristic of some ethnographic secret societies of the Pueblos (Ware 2014:123–4). Nevertheless, there has been considerable debate among archaeologists as to what great houses represent, how their settlements differed from other settlements, and whether they were vacant ritual centers for dispersed communities, or elite residences, trade centers, or other kinds of centers (Mills 2002:78–9). While Pueblo Bonito may have been a regional center for rituals that incorporated esoteric astronomical alignments (Mills 2002:93; Malville 2015, 2016:87,92), it is not as certain that all of the other two hundred or so identified great houses (Glowacki et al. 2015:472) were regional centers, especially since many are in close proximity to one another, perhaps serving localities rather than regions, or perhaps being sequentially built and used over different periods, or maybe representing numerous independent secret society organizations serving the same regions. The whole question of great houses requires much more research. However, assuming that at least some of the more elaborate cases like Pueblo Bonito were regional centers serving surrounding smaller communities (Mills 2002:80), they would seem to fit a cross-cultural archaeological pattern of regional ritual centers that emerged in the early stages of developing sociopolitical complexity similar to Göbekli Tepe, Chavín de Huántar, Poverty Point, Olmec regional centers, and several examples from China (see “The Far East and Micronesia”). As further discussed in Chapter II, such organizations could be termed “Super Secret Society Regional Polities.”

### **Causal Models**

One of the dominant explanations in the Southwest for the creation of great houses and specialized ritual structures can be referred to as “the power of ritual and beliefs” (Mills 2002:78–9,81,94). In particular, Potter (2000:296,301)

has argued that the control of esoteric knowledge was the source of power for creating social hierarchies and was far more important than economic control or control of other resources. Whalen and Minnis (2001) specifically link sociopolitical power to the control of ideas rather than to economics. As should be evident from the preceding chapters and discussions, I think that this is a profound misunderstanding of the underlying dynamics involved in secret societies, even if superficial observations may seem to support such a notion, as in the more resource-stressed communities like the Southwest where the public appearance of conformity to egalitarian ethic is more scrutinized by community residents (see Chapter 4). The strong pattern that has emerged from the ethnographies is one in which claims to esoteric knowledge and supernatural power were primarily rhetorical façades or charades used to justify domination over others by those wanting the most power (and who already had some economic and social leverage). As we have seen, such secret societies were typically underwritten by lineages or individuals who controlled economic resources and enforced acquiescence to society dictates by physical violence if necessary. It seems highly unlikely that the Southwest would have been fundamentally different even if there were public sanctions on overt manifestations of ambition.

#### *California and the Northwest Coast*

There is a long history of both ethnographic and archaeological interest in documenting “dance houses” or “sweat houses” among the northern and central California native groups. The ethnographic links with secret societies appear direct enough for them to be easily identified in the archaeological record. There is one good example from the Morro site in the Chumash area with burials in its floor (c. 300–1050 CE); however, the largest and clearest examples of dance houses come from the protohistoric and historic periods (Gamble 1995:65; 2012:187). The participation of secret society members in mourning ceremonies should also be emphasized since such rituals can be identified in the archaeological record dating back to 1000–3000 BP (e.g., Hull et al. 2013; see also Chapter 3). Similarly, the use of caves by secret societies again should be emphasized, as pointed out in Chapter 3 (see Hudson and Underhay 1978; Krupp 1993). During the colonial period more than eighty “cache caves” were used in southern California for the storage of ritual paraphernalia associated with ‘Antap secret societies, including bone whistles and bullroarers (Whitby 2012). The occurrence of various types of ritual paraphernalia has also been used by archaeologists to infer the existence of secret societies in the past, such as the bone whistles and sun sticks used to infer the existence of the ‘Antap Society at least a thousand years ago (Corbett 2004:70).

In the American Northwest, it seems remarkable that the rich ethnographic record dealing with secret societies has not been reflected in archaeological



interpretations. In fact, there appear to be no structures that have been archaeologically interpreted as used for rituals on the Northwest Coast, and only one example in the Northwest Interior. This is probably due in part to the use of large multifamily houses for major secret society rituals in the late prehistoric periods. However, a small round structure with oversized central post holes at Xá:ytem (Ormerod and Matson 2000) does not make good sense as a domestic residence and is unique in the Fraser River Valley, especially at the early time period of its occupation (*c.* 4500 BP). It was, more plausibly, an early ritual structure. Moreover, as suggested in Chapter 2, in earlier times, both round pithouse structures and square plank structures were used contemporaneously at a number of prehistoric sites in the Fraser Valley (Ritchie 2010). While these different structure types have not been interpreted in ritual versus domestic terms, the possible ritual use of one of these types of structures seems at least worth considering.

In the Northwest Interior, the site of Keatley Creek where I have excavated has provided the only example of structures that have been interpreted as specialized ritual buildings for the Northwest, and perhaps all of western Canada (Hayden and Adams 2004; Sheppard 2007; Morin 2010). I think that their construction and use by secret societies is the most plausible explanation for their occurrence. The characteristics of most relevance were the separation of these structures from the main residential area of the site by 100–200 meters; relatively clean floors in some structures while adjacent structures exhibited unusual characteristics of the lithic and faunal assemblages, including the occurrence of gaming pieces, bullroarers, a unique crescent biface, and bird species associated with shamanistic activities; unusual prestige items (bone button decorations, dentalium, nephrite adzes, and coastal shells); highly unusual rock-lined hearths unique at the site; special floor preparations; exceptionally large storage capacities; probable war clubs; the sacrifice of dogs and use of dog bone drinking or sucking tubes; evidence of feasting; and probable bone scratchers. Secret “dance” societies that included dog sacrifices were also well documented for the area ethnographically. The emergence of secret societies at this site fits the pattern that has been chronicled in the preceding chapters. The site was one of the largest sites in the interior with an estimated peak population of well over a thousand residents. The community was organized into residential corporate groups so that ambitious individuals would have needed a type of organization that cross-cut corporate kinship groups in order to implement any political agendas on a larger scale, *i.e.*, beyond kin groups. There seem to have been adequate surpluses to support large aggregated communities as well as the acquisition of prestige items and the breeding of dogs. Thus, there should have been plenty of surpluses to support a variety of surplus-based aggrandizer strategies including secret societies. I think that the interpretation of the specialized peripheral structures at Keatley Creek as secret society lodges is, by far, the most plausible explanation for these structures.

### *Eastern United States*

Although secret societies have traditionally received little or no archaeological attention east of the Mississippi River, David Dye (2016) has raised their possible importance for understanding Mississippian rituals (especially those that utilized ritual black drinks) and the patterns of prestige goods exchanges, including items with distinctive Mississippian iconographies. Similarly, rock art in the Eastern Woodlands has been largely ignored until the publication of the images from the dark zones of Picture Cave in Missouri, linked to Cahokia (Diaz-Granados et al. 2015; Lankford 2015; see also Claassen 2012; Prufer and Prufer 2012). The volume by Diaz-Granados et al. demonstrated that using dark zones of caves was a widespread ancient tradition in the eastern United States, and that important rituals took place in them from the mid-first to the mid-second millennium CE. It seems at least plausible that such caves were used by secret societies, but further research is obviously required to establish this. It may also be worth considering that secret societies were present in earlier periods as well and that they could provide a framework for understanding regional or broader developments, such as the Hopewell Interaction Sphere with its exchange of prestige objects, special iconography, and sometimes imposing monuments.

On the Plains, Zedeño et al. (2014) have proposed that stone circles with astronomical alignments and ritual bundles (such as those used by the secret societies described in Chapter 5) were probably related to the existence of secret societies prior to European contact and were based on the wealth produced from bison hunting. Huffman and Earley (2014) have also identified a thirteenth-century Plains type of ritual lodge in Colorado which could represent a secret society meeting location. The prehistoric occurrence of a secret society like the *Midewiwin* has been documented in the area around the Great Lakes on the basis of distinctive ritual paraphernalia and art motifs (Weeks 2009, 2012).

### *Mesoamerica*

The use of caves for ritual purposes is abundantly documented in the archaeology of Mesoamerica (Brady 1989; Stone 1995; Prufer and Brady 2005; Moyes and Brady 2012). Curiously, no one has raised the possibility that any of the caves were used by secret societies. Similarly, there were frequently burials in the caves with substantial grave goods; however, why a few individuals should be buried in caves, away from their communities, has rarely if ever been addressed. Renewed interest in Mesoamerican caves has revealed that they were frequently used by elites who were sometimes buried in them and who often came from a regional network. Human sacrifices frequently also took

place in caves, sometimes involving cannibalism. Caves were only used episodically for short periods, and they were considered places of dangerous power that could harm ordinary people (Stone 1995:65,107,142,156; Gibbs 1998; Scott and Brady 2005:264,274,276–7; Brady and Garza 2009:76; Moyes and Brady 2012). The skillful paintings in Naj Tunich were especially graphic, revealing events “of high drama with rhythm, music, dance, and cries of human sacrifice” (Stone 1995:131). Masked dancers, bloodletting, and meditation were also depicted, with an emphasis on personal experiences (Stone 1995:184,222,241). Given the indications of visitors from a large region, Stone (1995:156–7) even views the ritual use of caves as a possible “vehicle of regional political cohesion.” These were all common characteristics of secret societies, including the portrayal of secret society meeting places as threatening and dangerous with appropriate punishments for transgressors. In addition, Brady and Garza (2009:77) observed natural and architectural restrictions in Naj Tunich that restricted access to progressively more sacred parts of the cave in a manner reminiscent of the progressive series of eating areas of *Suque* Society clubhouses in Vanuatu (Chapter 7).

Thus, it seems that there are reasonable grounds for at least investigating the likelihood that Maya caves were used by secret society organizations (with many characteristics similar to the *cofradia* and cargo systems described in Chapter 4) during the Classic, and possibly Preclassic, periods, or even earlier as might be indicated by the two beheaded children and three other burials of c. 5000 BCE in Coxcatlan Cave (Drennan 1983). To date, explanations for these uses of caves have centered on caves as places to propitiate rain and earth deities or spirits, and as pilgrimage centers for such rituals (Stone 1995:107,117,154; Moyes and Brady 2012). However, these provide only superficial and not very informative explanations about the symbolical content or rituals rather than their importance in sociopolitical terms. We have not been told who was conducting the rituals and undertaking the pilgrimages (presumably shamans, political elites, their scribes, and/or secret society members?), or why substantial investments in time and effort were made in some caves, or what benefits were expected from such undertakings. The appeal to pilgrimages leaves out the social, political, and economic dimensions of these events which provide more compelling explanations than the simple putative populist beliefs in the supernatural powers of distant sacred sites (see Chapter 11). In such accounts, we are always left wondering why such beliefs were promoted and how large numbers of powerful individuals were persuaded to adopt them, at least in public contexts. What benefits did they provide? We will return to the issue of pilgrimages in the next chapter.

Given the were-jaguar and other power animal iconographies like the feathered serpent, the major regional ritual centers of the Olmec may also have emerged from early secret society organizations and become “Super Secret

Society Politics,” or ritual centers, like Chaco and the other examples previously discussed.

Another candidate for consideration as an example of archaeological secret societies is provided by the ten small lime-plastered structures at San José Mogote in Oaxaca. In contrast to domestic structures with sand floors and domestic occupation refuse, these structures had almost no refuse on their floors. Marcus (1999) has interpreted these early structures (c. 1400 BCE) as precursors of later Zapotec lineage houses. However, the dominant iconography was of mythical power entities (lightning and earthquake) rather than ancestral figures. There are also stone humanoid masks with fangs in Oaxaca (reminiscent of the stone masks from Nahal Hemar; Brzezinski et al. 2017:516,518) which would fit nicely in a secret society context. Moreover, there was evidence for the induction of altered states of consciousness (not usually associated with lineage ancestor worship practices); the buildings had astronomical alignments (again, not characteristic of lineage ancestor worship); and the multiple early small ritual structures apparently developed into a single regional cult using large imposing architecture. It is difficult to understand how lineage ancestral worship could have created such a strong, centralized regional support base. As discussed in the next section and in previous chapters, I think that secret societies had great potential for creating centralized regional cults that could command considerable resources for rituals and architecture. Thus, I think that it is worth considering the merit of interpreting the earlier small structures at San José Mogote as secret society structures

### *South America*

Perhaps the most exciting outcome from the study of secret societies has been the realization that the relatively simple forms documented among complex hunter/gatherers on the American Northwest Coast and in California could have gone on to become much more powerful regional organizations under conditions favorable for producing ever greater surpluses. The ethnographically documented goals of secret society members wanting to acquire greater wealth and power provide a logical and causal basis – a driving force – for such an interpretation, and the amazing quantities of wealth surrendered for initiations seem consistent with such a development as well. The complex *Poros* Societies of West Africa provide an ethnographic warrant for this view, and sites like Göbekli Tepe, the Chacoan great houses, the Olmec ritual centers, Minoan peak sanctuaries, and several sites in China could well provide further archaeological support for this model of “Super Secret Society Regional Politics.” In South America, perhaps the premier site that could fit into this scenario is Chavín de Huántar in the Peruvian highlands. In the Middle and Late Formative Periods (c. 1300–500 BCE), it became a major ritual center importing or attracting a wide range of

prestige goods from the coast and far-flung localities. Its iconography spread throughout the region so that it has been referred to as the Andean “mother culture,” although many of the elements probably had origins at centers other than Chavín in the context of smaller, simpler secret society organizations.

What were the features at Chavín that point toward a developed super secret society? John Rick (2008:10,29–34), who has excavated at the site for several decades, has made some of the most cogent observations on the nature of Chavín. The site itself is isolated from the main valley and residential areas by rivers on two sides, which would have to be crossed for access to the site, while there is a steep mountain escarpment on its third side. After a tour of the site led by John Rick, it seemed evident that the large open courtyards and iconographies were created for ceremonies meant to impress large numbers of people (Fig. 10.7). These ceremonies could be readily viewed and heard by spectators in or around the large courtyards at the site as well as by onlookers from hillsides across the rivers. Such public displays were hallmarks of most secret societies. However, there were also remarkable galleries built into the principal mounds at the site (more than two kilometers of underground galleries containing side rooms only large enough for small groups of people). These galleries and rooms must have been used for far more private rituals (Fig. 10.8). The rituals in these secluded locations involved anthropophagy, evidenced by a good number of fragmented human bones mixed with butchered camelid bones at the entrances to some of these galleries (J. Rick, personal communication, and my own personal observations). There was also abundant evidence of induced hallucinogenic sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) in the iconography of transformed human faces, the prominent depiction of the hallucinogenic San Pedro cacti (Fig. 10.9), and the recovery from feasting refuse of paraphernalia used for ingesting psychoactive substances (Mesia 2013). Power animals (caimans, jaguars, were-jaguars, snakes) abounded in the iconography as did therianthropic transformed humans. Indeed, everything about Chavín seemed meant to impress people, including the architecture and the manipulation of water, sound, light, and images. Rick has shown that the use of multiple conch shell trumpets creates psychologically disorienting states, and more than twenty of these trumpets have been recovered at the site. The hefty shells had to be imported from at least 1,200 kilometers away (a minimum of a month of full-time travel by very fit individuals). These shell horns seem similar to the multiple sheep horns blown in unison representing the voice of spirits in the Sheephorn Devil Society (see Chapter 9, “Paraphernalia”). The sheer scale and elaborateness of the architecture clearly required the participation of individuals who controlled great power and wealth. It is inconceivable that there would not have been some kind of hierarchical organization that constructed the site and organized rituals, including procuring the human sacrificial victims.

Initiates were apparently drawn from a large region, judging by the many non-local materials and ceramics deposited at the site, indicating a membership

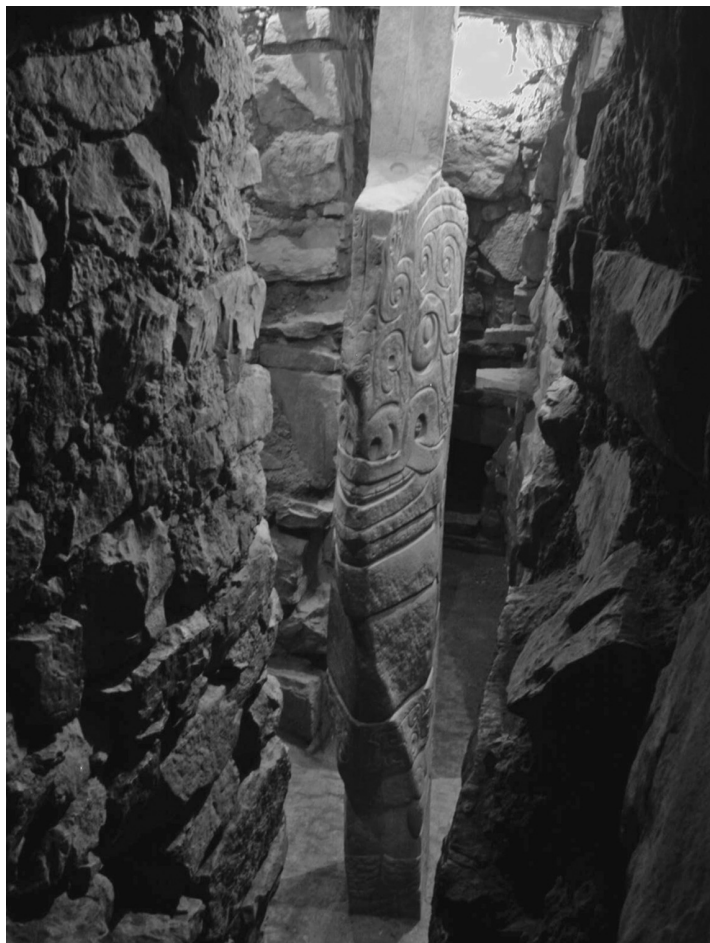


10.7 The main plaza at Chavín de Huántar with the main structure behind it. While the plaza was suitable for large public or semi-public spectacles with many spectators, the large buildings were honeycombed with narrow passages and rooms suitable only for small groups of exclusive individuals involved in secret rituals, including cannibalism (Photo by B. Hayden).

that cross-cut not only kinship groups but ethnic and probably linguistic groups as well. It seems evident that no effort was spared to impress initiates and spectators with putative manifestations of powerful supernatural forces that high-ranking members of the cult claimed they could summon up and control. As Rick (2008:10,29–34) has argued, this was not a system-serving or communitarian ritual organization, but a predatory one very similar to the regional secret societies of West Africa.

Many archaeologists appeal to pilgrimage models to explain the attraction and power of Chavín. It is entirely likely that many elites did travel to Chavín in order to enter into transformed states of consciousness related to power animals and to acquire some of the supernatural powers that the organization claimed to control. These trips could be called a “pilgrimage.” However, it does not appear that such trips took the form of pious worship or were motivated primarily by belief. Rather, it appears that the attraction of Chavín was to promote the political connections and claims to power of ambitious elites of the region, something beyond the usual connotations of ethnohistoric pilgrimages that are undertaken primarily by non-elites (see Chapter 11). As was the case with ethnographic secret societies, there were a number of competing regional ritual centers in the highlands as well as on the coast





10.8 One of the rooms in the gallery system at Chavín contained a sculpted monolith called the Lanzón depicting an intimidating mythical power animal which must have been meant to instill terror in viewers. Note the extremely limited space surrounding the Lanzón that only a few people could occupy (Photo courtesy of John Rick).

that operated more or less within the same Chavínoid format. These centers undoubtedly vied with one another to attract powerful elites as members in order to augment their society coffers and control (Rick 2008:10,29–34). Thus, I think that Chavín de Huántar is a prime candidate for the application of an evolved secret society model. In this view, Chavín would have created a new level of regional integration and power that was prior and transitional to the establishment of centralized political authority and the creation of state-sponsored cults. The ritual buildings at the highland center of Kotosh (*c.* 1800–1150 BCE) may represent an earlier, simpler version of this type of secret society. There is also a remarkable Early Formative semi-subterranean ritual building in the Atacama Desert of Chile which has many characteristics of a secret society ritual structure. These included restricted access for a small number of





10.9 One of the sculpted stone slabs lining a courtyard at Chavín showing a person partly transformed into a mythical feline power animal and carrying a San Pedro cactus used to induce hallucinogenic experiences. Such costuming or mental states of transformation were typical of secret societies (Photo courtesy of John Rick).

people, a proto-elite who controlled rituals, use as a regional center, possible infant sacrifices, psychotropic plant use, feasting, associated burials, and exotic ritual paraphernalia of gold, copper, and lead (Núñez et al. 2017). Whether similar organizations occurred on the coast at this time or earlier is still to be determined, but seems probable.

Recent work in Amazonia at Santarém along the Amazon River has revealed a late prehistoric regional network of ritual specialists who exchanged ritual items and ritual knowledge, resulting in a system that enabled “the emergence of a political force beyond the village,” although power appears to have been transitory (Gomes 2017:291) – as was true of most ethnographic secret society regional networks. Gomes argued that this rule by ritual was predicated on the claims of people who said they were able to transform themselves into animals or supernatural beings which acted like predators, including cannibalism – essentially the use of threats and terror. These were, again, common characteristics of ethnographic secret societies.

Secret societies may even have emerged among relatively sedentary complex hunter/gatherers in some favorable areas of the Andean Highlands during the Archaic period 4,000 years earlier. In the Asana Valley, Mark Aldenderfer (1998:256–7) excavated a series of specialized structures that

he interpreted as having been built and used for ceremonial purposes with both public plaza areas and more exclusive enclosed ritual areas. With their unusual stone-lined hearths (Aldenderfer 1998:221), prepared floors, and lack of material remains on their floors, some of these structures bear a remarkable resemblance to the ritual structures interpreted as secret society lodges at the Keatley Creek site on the American Northwest Plateau. Tellingly, some of the ethnographic comparisons that Aldenderfer (222,257) made were to ritual structures of the Chumash *'Antap* Societies in California, although he never specifically mentioned secret societies beyond this comparison of structures. Aldenderfer (303–4) went on to postulate that specialized ritual organizations and structures developed in order to cope with population pressures that created demographic circumscription, regional packing, and subsistence stresses. This is at odds with all the indications from ethnographic sources that have been reviewed in previous chapters showing that secret societies were based on the production of surpluses. Nevertheless, I would agree with Aldenderfer's conclusion (304) that ritual had “a major role to play in the extension of hierarchy and inequality in so-called egalitarian societies ... it was simultaneously extending existing social inequalities” at the site. He argued that circumscription gave those in a “ritually defined hierarchy an opportunity to extend the range of their power” (306), although this extension was viewed as based on belief, which Aldenderfer acknowledged must have been tied to manipulation, persuasion, and perceived benefits in relation to other alternatives.

### *The Far East and Micronesia*

Given the relative complexity of the largely hunting, gathering, and fishing cultures of the Jomon period in Japan, some Jomon centers might be good candidates for producing indications of secret societies. Jomon societies have often been described as complex hunter/gatherers with socioeconomic inequalities, feasting, storage, large aggregations of up to a thousand people, monumental architecture, prestige items, and even a few domesticates in some places and times (including gourds, mint, millet, and some condiments) (Habu 2004; Kobayashi 2004). In a number of areas like Nagano Prefecture, there are scores of specialized cult structures with stone pillars, altars, and phallic forms (Habu 2004:181–4; Kobayashi 2004:180–7; Valat 2014:67). Ritual objects occurred from the Initial Jomon period and became abundant by the Middle Jomon, including ceramic and hide masks, jade ornaments, and stone rods or swords up to a meter in length (Habu 2004:151–62, 215–33; Kobayashi 2004:158–61; Valat 2014:107, 117–18, 120–1, 166–7). The materials from which these and other prestige objects were made indicate regional networks of exchange and probably regional ritual involvements. In addition to the ceramic masks, many of the

ceramic figurines appear to be wearing masks (Kaner 2009:34,115,160,162–4), and, as has been shown in previous chapters, masks are predominantly associated with secret societies. There were numerous stone circles as well as monumental wood constructions with alignments to the solstices and lunar associations (Habu 2004; Kobayashi 2004:180–7; Valat 2014:103,126–8,130). There were also stone circles not associated with residential communities which seem to represent gathering places for ritual ceremonies, perhaps similar to Melanesian dancing grounds in bush training/initiation camps or shrines in the American Southwest. Most stone circles varied between 20 and 40 meters in diameter (Kodama 2003), comparable in size to dancing grounds in Vanuatu. In the case of the Komakino stone circle, a series of concentric stone circles was tiered and the interior area was artificially leveled, involving 315 cubic meters of material. A select number of burials occurred within some of these sites, while smaller burial stone circles occurred outside the circle (as in the case of *Suque* houses and dancing grounds in the Banks Islands), leading Kodama (2003:256,358) to suggest that they were authorities, shamans, or individuals of high status. Much larger earthen rings about 100 meters in diameter also occurred associated with residential structures. These might be compared to the largest Melanesian dancing grounds often located within communities. Finally, there were burned human skulls in some Early Jomon ritual sites, raising the possibility of cremations or anthropophagy (Habu 2004:173–4).

In the Middle Neolithic of China (c. 3650–3150 BCE), substantial wealth inequalities emerged in the Liao River Valley, as did a number of regional ritual sites, including monumental architecture at the Niheliang complex of sixteen mountaintop ritual sites located throughout a 50 square kilometer area. These ritual sites had semi-subterranean circular structures, much like kivas or the ritual structures at Göbekli Tepe. They were associated with face masks, jades, and elite cairn tombs within square or round enclosures (Liu and Chen 2012:178–82; Drennan et al. 2017). According to Drennan et al. (2017:44): “Ritual and ceremony seem to be the principal centripetal forces that drew people together into supra-local communities or districts, and formed the basis of leadership in these small regional polities.” These authors view the Niheliang monuments as regional pilgrimage centers for elites and shamans and possibly others. This is also their interpretation of other ritual centers like Chavín de Huántar and Chaco (Drennan et al. 2017:54) – contentions that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 11. Like some ethnographic secret society ritual locations, the Niheliang centers were not located within communities but up to several hundred meters outside them. The main temple-like structure that was excavated could accommodate “only a very limited number of people” (52). There were no overtly political administrative structures. Thus, the Niheliang ritual centers provide another possible example of a Super Secret Society Regional Polity.

In the Lower Yangzi, regional ritual centers created iconographies that featured power animals such as tigers, mythical dragons, and raptors, and they developed rituals that required close astronomical observations (Drennan et al. 2017:197,206–7). Later, the power animals became transformed into therianthropic beasts. Liu and Chen (2012:226,296) argued that political power in these areas was based on ritual power and the access to ritual paraphernalia and knowledge (specifically calendrical knowledge needed for successful agriculture) which was controlled by the elites. Such interpretations of political control based on calendrical knowledge that was purportedly needed for productive agriculture is simply not tenable (see B. Hayden 2003; Hayden and Villeneuve 2011). Elsewhere, Liu and Chen (2012:167) argued that ritual actions and specialists developed as the result of scalar and economic stress. As in a number of secret societies, human sacrifices were important parts of rituals in some of these early Chinese ritual organizations (Liu and Chen 2012:284). While I disagree with this construction of causality based on stresses and a critical agricultural calendar, the ritual sites that Liu and Chen described appear to be good candidates for secret society organizations based on the production and control of wealth and surpluses.

Guam, in Micronesia, has recently provided another archaeological example of caves used for rituals (Carson 2017). “The Ritidian caves are indisputably extraordinary places, where people used unusual artefacts, consumed rare meals, created distinctive artworks and generally behaved in ways atypical of their ordinary lives” (Carson 2017:440). Of considerable interest was the use of points made from human bones (presumably for magical power), the use of unusual pottery forms, special burial practices, and the association of the caves with bedrock mortars. All these factors seem consistent with secret society use.

## SUMMARY

Overall, there are many archaeological ritual sites throughout the world that may owe their origin to secret societies or the organizations that evolved from them. I have only attempted to provide a sampling of such sites to demonstrate the kinds of evidence that might be marshalled to support these interpretations. I make no pretense at exhaustive coverage or definitive interpretations. I have tried to cast a wide net in order to explore what seemed like some of the better possibilities. I think the most convincing cases involve Hilazon Tachtit, Nahal Hemar, Göbekli Tepe, Jerf el Ahmar, prehistoric kivas and caves in the American Southwest, Chavín de Huántar, and the ritual structures at the Keatley Creek site, although there are many other probable cases.

Some of the most intriguing implications from the larger sites like Göbekli and Chavín are the potential developmental paths that secret society organizations may have taken toward the creation of state religions prehistorically. There is

nothing quite like Super Secret Society Regional Polities in the ethnographic record. But then, there is nothing quite like these large complex ritual sites anywhere in the ethnographic record of transegalitarian or chiefdom societies. The development of secret societies into more complex and more powerful types of organizations is one of the most important possible developments that this study has raised. It may be the key – the missing link – to understanding why ritual, astronomy, sacrifice, and religion were so central to early state societies. This is a topic that I take up in more detail in the next and final chapter.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## CONCLUSIONS

We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

I began this inquiry long ago with some initial observations and suspicions about secret societies that seemed to indicate that they played important roles in the acquisition of power and the creation of inequalities. Now, having examined numerous ethnographic examples of secret societies, it seems possible to confirm that these initial impressions were warranted, although with a much more nuanced understanding of the subtleties and variations involved. While the overview of ethnographic examples of secret societies has not been exhaustive, it has encompassed enough geographical variability (including most of the classic cases) to provide some confidence that the overall patterns are typical.

In this chapter, I would like to review some of the more important features and issues as well as draw out some implications for the development of more complex religious and political forms. As always, the material characteristics of secret societies are of paramount importance for archaeologists and the establishment of a prehistory of secret societies. I will begin with some of the more important common features of the most powerful secret societies. We need to keep in mind, however, that “start up” or less powerful secret societies probably did not share many of these characteristics simply because they

were not powerful enough, even though the motivations for forming them or joining them may have been the same. There were also lesser secret societies formed to defend members from depredations of the more powerful societies. Unfortunately, there is not much information in the ethnographies about these lesser secret societies.

## COMMON SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PATTERNS

### *Political Influence*

In almost all cases studied in the previous chapters, secret societies (or their high-ranking members) either directly controlled political figures and decisions or had inordinate influences in these areas. The *Poro* and *Suque* are outstanding examples, while on the American Plains secret society priests explicitly created the roles of secular chiefs for their own purposes (Bailey 1995:74). In the Southwestern United States, Brandt (1977:23,25,27; 1980:126–8,141) made it very clear that leaders of secret societies held the most political power in Pueblo communities, often enforcing their will on the disenfranchised majority who protested the system but to no effect (Brandt 1977:25). Similarly, Schachner (2001:170) cited numerous studies of Southwestern rituals that depicted ritual as a primary pathway to power and an important means of legitimizing asymmetrical power relations.

### *Terror*

In reviewing the ethnographic information on secret societies, I was surprised at how frequently terror was used by most secret societies to obtain compliance with their dictates and ideologies. As has been documented, the use of terror and violence was especially directed against women and children, often including the sequestering of non-initiates in houses for certain events as well as the wild destruction of property by those possessed by spirits, even including biting spectators, killing anyone who dared contravene secret society dictates, threats or real acts of cannibalism, stealing souls, and the dismemberment of live dogs. Terrifying visions were manufactured of what could happen to people or communities if supernatural forces were unleashed. Among others, the cannibal spirits in the forests of the American Northwest Coast waited to possess uninitiated people who then attacked and ate people in their communities, all vividly enacted in ritual displays not unlike Hollywood horror movies of vampires or zombies that threatened communities or even all of humanity. Only the secret societies claimed to be able to save their world.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli advocated that politicians use terror to secure their power. A comparable treatise, the *Han Fei Tzu*, was written in the third century



BCE by Chinese legalists and was even more extreme than Machiavelli (Walter 1969:47). The Zulu state was created by King Shaka who based his political expansion and control on the indiscriminate use of terror (Walter 1969), as did many other African and Near Eastern kingdoms (Dickson 2006). Some scholars maintain that the use of violence is a defining characteristic of political structures versus other social organizations. They argue that “force, physical coercion, and violence ... lie at the heart of politics” (Walter 1969:48). This is in stark contrast to more communitarian views of the origins of political complexity (Walter 1969:51). Thus, as a major (although, as Walter argues, not universal) strategy for securing and expanding political control in the emergence of early political centralization, it should perhaps not be surprising to find terror used to acquire political control by secret societies in chiefdoms and transegalitarian societies. It is thus of considerable interest to note how commonly the terms “terror,” “terrorize,” and “terrorists,” occurred in describing secret societies, their activities, and their members. The highest *Poro* degrees have been described as “post-graduate degrees” in the use of terror and fright (Walter 1969:94), while Drucker (1941) described Northwest Coast secret societies as terrorist organizations.

As part of terrorist intimidation, there were generally severe penalties, especially death, for revealing any aspects of mask manufacture or means of making spirit noises, or the fact that masks were worn by community members rather than being spirit manifestations. Moreover, masks, and the claims of spirit possessions by those who wore masks, removed responsibility for extreme behavior from the individuals wearing the masks – no matter how violent or anti-social – as well as rendering the actions anonymous and sanctioned by supernatural beings. Any kind of possession could be used and justified in the same way. Those who wore masks were not responsible for their actions since these were manifestations of the spirits, and the spirits of the masks dictated the appropriate behavior to their owner/users (Walter 1969:86,96). Walter compared the donning of a spirit mask to the wearing of a police uniform in that the individual was no longer responsible for their actions or the mandates that they carried out, which supposedly came from higher authorities, thus transcending all other relationships (Walter 1969:84,86). However, he also noted the difference that the mask was intended to instill fear and conceal the person’s identity, so perhaps a comparison to a riot police officer wearing a face shield would be more appropriate. Such explanations for aberrant behavior appear to have simply been pretexts since ethnographers in most areas observed that secret society members considered themselves above morality (see “Morality of Leaders as Anti-social or Above Norms”).

### *Use of Ecstasy*

Inducing emotionally powerful sacred ecstatic experiences (SEEs) during initiations through the use of a variety of techniques was extremely common

if not universal. These techniques included seclusion, sensory deprivation, fasting, sleep deprivation, endless drumming-chanting-dancing, disorientation, dramatic lighting and costuming, extremes of heat and cold, bleeding, exhaustion, physically painful ordeals, terrible sensations, psychotropic plants, and emotional shocks (e.g., masked performances, terrifying scenes of destruction, violations of taboos via human sacrifices and cannibalism). Drumming, singing, and dancing for long periods were especially prevalent in many secret societies, hence their frequent descriptions as dance societies. Such psycho-physical ordeals most likely served several functions. First, inducing SEEs served to validate claims that the society held the secrets for contacting supernatural powers and entities. They created feelings of transcendence and unity with higher forces (however conceived), if not vivid visions of spirits. Second, these experiences as well as the psychophysiological effects of extreme experiences served to bind individuals to the organizations as well as to the ideologies of the organizations. This helped to guarantee candidates' keeping of secrets and their fidelity to the society – a bond surpassing loyalty to kin or community. Third, as noted above, the induction of SEEs encouraged members to act out hostilities or resentments in dramatic fashions, demonstrating to all onlookers the power of the spirits that supposedly possessed the individuals. In fact, all secret societies examined had public performances demonstrating either the supernatural (and profane) power of members or the power of the spirits as manifested by masked or possessed performers. The consequent ideologies maintained that it was necessary to travel to the world of spirits – usually the upper world – to acquire knowledge about supernatural power, how to acquire it, and how to control it.

Thus, the initiations of new members featuring some form of ecstatic performance were often the main ceremonies of societies. Generally, weeks or months, but up to one or more years, were involved in the seclusion and training of initiates which in many cases varied according to the wealth of the family. During this seclusion period, initiates were said to be residing in the spirit world. Poorer families probably could not afford to have productive members absent for long periods.

### *Binding Members*

In addition to the emotional bonds to the secret society and its members created by undergoing severe physical and emotional trials, many secret societies demanded other costly demonstrations of loyalty and devotion to their organization, much like gang initiations in contemporary industrial societies or the price to be paid for joining the dark side in *Star Wars*. This could simply involve the surrender of large amounts of wealth; however, it could also include giving one's wife away, or even the sacrifice and eating of one's eldest son. After

such acts, there would be little doubt that an individual was completely devoted to the secret society and would do anything necessary to retain their position.

### *Exclusivity and Cross-cutting Social Groups*

The membership of major secret societies, at least above the entry level, was highly restrictive and only included those with great wealth and/or high political/kinship positions. Members cross-cut kinship groups as well as community or even linguistic and ethnic social units. The fact that some positions were hereditary within kinship groups guaranteed that a range of kinship groups were consistently represented in memberships. Within each society there was a series of hierarchically ranked, increasingly exclusive, and expensive grades or positions.

### *Motives and the Promotion of Self-interests*

Material privileges as well as prestige, exclusiveness, conviviality, the attraction of mystery, awe, curiosity, and the use of fear were suggested as the motives for forming secret societies by Webster (1932:106). While undoubtedly true, such a characterization tends to idealize or obscure what appear to have been the major underlying motives involving personal benefits and power documented in the preceding chapters. As Webster (1932:95) also noted:

The members of the inner circle ... come to realize what a means for personal advancement is to be found in the manipulation of the tribal ceremonies. The tendency will then be constantly to widen the gap between the initiated and the uninitiated, and to surround the organization so formed with every appliance for working on the fear and awe of the outsiders.

Members of secret societies had many rights and privileges, and thus formed “a rude but powerful aristocracy” (Webster 1932:76). Indeed, the pervasive use of terror is difficult to explain in any other terms than the imposition of control by those seeking power. It did not fundamentally result from any desire for conviviality, attraction of mystery, or curiosity. Nor was the use of terror compatible with any altruistic or communitarian assumptions about organizers’ motives. Instead, the psychological picture of secret society leaders and organizers corresponds very closely, if not exactly, to the personality characteristics of typical aggrandizers who tended toward sociopathology as described by Hare (1993).

### IDEOLOGICAL PATTERNS

Given the self-serving motives attributed to traditional secret society leaders, and undoubtedly in order to justify demands for community resources or

political power, organizers invented and promoted a range of ideological propositions about the supernatural in order to enhance their positions and advantages. In the most typical form, supernatural power was portrayed as dangerous, something that could be capricious and destructive, including fires, floods, or cannibal spirits waiting to possess uninitiated individuals. Individuals and communities had to be protected from these dangerous forces, and, according to secret society ideologies, only secret societies could save communities from such threats and provide for their well-being. Only they had the ritual knowledge and paraphernalia necessary to do so. Following this logic, it would be natural to claim that the community owed a debt of gratitude as well as material and labor support to the secret societies for ensuring its safety and well-being.

It was also dangerous for uninitiated people to even get close to those dealing with such powerful forces – a convenient means of preventing close scrutiny of sham displays of supposedly supernatural powers. Moreover, claims to be able to control such powers carried the tacit, or not-so-tacit, implication that the same forces could wreck households of opponents, or worse, if left uncontrolled or permitted to do so. Such claims could become veiled threats, and were materialized at times in rampages by the out-of-control or angered costumed “spirits.” Ideological warrants for this kind of terror were a recurring feature in the vast majority of the principal power-oriented secret societies.

Another ideological variant was that militaristic secret societies typically emphasized the ability of supernatural forces to protect individuals against physical assaults, while curing or fertility-oriented societies emphasized the beneficial aspect of their supernaturally aided cures (for ailments often thought to have been caused by secret society members). In all these ideologies, special training and knowledge was required to control such power – even if individuals had no predilections for entering trances or other supernatural skills – which only secret societies, or their high-ranking members, claimed to possess. A corollary ideological claim was that members knew how to transfer this knowledge and power to initiates. Notions that such transfers endangered those providing the power (and who thus had to be generously compensated), or that such transfers were most effectively made via having sex with the initiate’s wife, are some of the most transparently self-serving aspects of the ideologies that were promulgated by secret society members.

In many cases, the supernatural forces took the form of ancestors (Eliade 1958:39), or supernatural animal-like ancestral spirits, or power animals that served as supernatural patrons. In some cases, such as the secret societies in the Banks Islands, ancestors were simply considered as previous office holders. Frequently, these supernatural forces were said to possess the bodies of members or to transform members into those ancestral entities when performers donned masks, costumes, and acted out dances or behaviors imitating those supernatural entities. In a number of cases, claims of actual transformations into power

animals, such as real bears, tigers, or alligators, were claimed to take place. Attributing deaths from attacks by any of those animals to transformed secret society members helped to terrorize lower ranks or non-initiates.

Travel to spirit realms for initiation, inspiration, or acquiring ritual information was another typical aspect of secret society ideology. The spirit realms were frequently portrayed as somewhere in the sky, and members often traveled to a portal in the sky such as the Pole Star or the Pleiades to enter the Sky World. Astronomical knowledge, especially involving solar and lunar movements, often formed a link between this Sky World and the functioning of life in the normal world. Astronomical observations thus frequently became part of secret society esoteric knowledge, details of which were held only by the highest ranking members of the societies.

Places where secret society rituals took place were always dangerous for non-initiates, both in ideological theory and in reality. Caves, in particular, were portrayed as exceptionally dangerous spiritual places that could cause the untrained or unauthorized to wither and die. A related ideological tenet was that transgressions of any number of ritually proscribed actions endangered the spiritual (and hence material) welfare of the community, if not the very lives of the ritual leaders of that community. Therefore, major fines or punishments – often killings – were meted out for any infractions of taboos or secret society rules or for any intrusion into secret society spaces. Such ideologically based threats must have helped maintain the subterfuges of secret societies. Payments of fines, of course, were given preferentially to the leaders. Such new ideological elements required, first, getting an entire array of ritual proscriptions accepted by a community, and second, getting the idea accepted that infractions were dangers to the community and leaders. Other new ideological components promoted by secret societies involved the need for costly paraphernalia and initiations, incurring debts for supernatural services, and wealth as resulting from supernatural knowledge together with the proper performance of rituals.

The rhetoric that secret societies functioned for the benefit of the community (like elite claims that leaders only did things for the good of their communities) undoubtedly stemmed from the tenuous nature of power in situations where claims to power, resources, and control could still be contested. Pushing the ideological claims of secret societies and their demands for material support too far could often backfire in a serious fashion. In the American Southwest, Ware (2014:41) noted that excessive leaders were banished, which was true even in more complex polities for chiefs or sometimes kings. On the Northwest Plateau, shamans who were thought to have let patients die or who were held responsible for deaths were killed (Boyd 1996:81–2). In the Maya region where I worked, I heard a number of reports of “bad curanderos” who had been killed by villagers who felt threatened, an observation also documented by Villa Rojas

(1977:892). A similar pattern has been reported by Chacon (2007:526–8) for the Amazon, where shamans were targeted to be killed numerous times. In the Tojolabal village of Jotana where I attempted to do some ethnoarchaeological work in the 1970s, I was told that all the “sorcerers” had been driven out. Blake and Clark (1999:58–61; see also Malefijt 1968:280) have reported a range of “leveling” mechanisms used in the Mesoamerican region to thwart excessive attempts to accrue power.

In order to protect themselves against popular resistance, reprisals, or push backs, and to act with impunity, I think that those claiming political or supernatural powers typically maintained resolute claims that they only acted for the good of the community. In addition, they banded together and ensured that their confrères were among the most powerful people in the community (e.g., heads or successful members of kin groups), thereby creating a triple defense: a validating ideological rhetoric, safety in numbers, and safety from powerful individual members backed by their kinship groups.

In general ideological terms, the knowledge claimed by secret societies was portrayed as being deeper than, but not radically different from, the knowledge widely known in their own tribal traditions (MacKenzie 1967:25). De Lucia (2014:381) documented a general tendency for elites to appropriate commoner rituals and symbols to “add legitimacy to their claims to power, to gain commoner acceptance, and to mask deeper political objectives.” Such a development seems to have occurred in the Eleusinian Mysteries (which likely formed a secret society), where the esoteric meaning of common myths was known only to initiates (Dalby 2003:148).

### *Acquiescence*

It is difficult to imagine why anyone would accept many of the above ideological claims without major incentives or pressures to do so. How did such self-serving ideologies become accepted – or at least tolerated – in communities that were, at some point, relatively egalitarian cultures? To gain acceptance of all these ideological claims and consequent privileges or powers, secret society organizers probably used a variety of strategies involving cajoling and coercion, the carrot and the stick. These included purported displays of supernatural power, terror and force, socioeconomic leverage on subordinate kin, the creation of debts through feasting or loans for marriages or burials, material displays of power, creation of fines and punishments for ritual infractions, and giving away food or gifts at feasts hosted by secret societies. Accepting food at society feasts, especially when combined with impressive magical displays, must have been particularly effective in creating implicit contracts of acquiescence or support for the ideological (and material) claims of secret societies, thus providing a powerful means for transforming community values and norms.

I think organizers of secret societies realized that one section of the population, perhaps 10–25 percent, would believe any spiritual claims that were presented in a charismatic fashion. They probably also realized that they could obtain acquiescence from many other people given enough pressure, including pressure on subordinate kin, pressures exerted through debts or loans, pressures to believe claims due to public demonstrations of putative supernatural powers, targeting of individuals for having broken sacred taboos, and the use of physical threats or coercion. There may have been still other means of exerting pressures to obtain acquiescence to the ideological and economic claims of secret society members. People who could be relatively easily pressured into public acquiescence with secret society dictates by these means probably constituted the majority, perhaps 40–70 percent, of communities. Some people clearly knew that the costumed visiting spirits were in reality humans wearing masks; however, the situation was probably analogous to knowledge about Santa Claus: everyone, other than some of the uninitiated, knew that the supernatural beings were a fiction, but no one would say as much in public when young children or uninitiated people were present. Even then, secret societies often had spies to detect doubters and deal with them.

The remaining part of the community, the recalcitrant individuals, would be the staunch atheists, skeptics, and non-believers, perhaps 10–25 percent of most communities. They posed a real threat to the power of secret societies since they could spread doubts and expose the magic tricks and spirit impersonations for the charades that they were and make others question the very foundation of the claimed basis of power of the secret societies. I think that it was above all these recalcitrant individuals who secret societies targeted for killing as a result of any trespass on secret society sacred areas, or breaking of taboos or secret society rules, or mocking the claims of secret societies.

#### *Morality of Leaders as Anti-social or Above Norms*

The self-centered and self-serving nature of most secret societies was also evident in the sometimes blatant disregard by members of social conventions, moralities, norms, values, debt agreements, and taboos. They sometimes simply did what they wanted with impunity. As we have seen, such activities included sexual exploitation, destruction of others' property, physical attacks or biting off flesh, murder or human sacrifices, wild dismemberment of live dogs, and cannibalism. As MacKenzie (1967:25) phrased it, "the highest grades often assume privileges beyond ordinary members of society and act in a way that is virtually anti-social." And Simmel (1950:360) added that: "The secret society lies in an area to which the norms of society do not extend."

Individuals who maintained a public persona of a kindly, community-minded elder could just as easily be terrorists when acting within secret



societies. As Walter (1969:83–4,95) said, “officials of the secret societies were kindly patriarchs who were also traditional terrorists.” Similarly, the public persona and rhetoric of *Midewiwin* members was retiring, gracious, and beneficent, whereas they exhibited shocking arrogance in private (Fortune 1932:113). In theory, Omaha secret societies were open, free, and democratic. In practice, they were aristocratic “but definitely secretively so” (Fortune 1932:6,158).

It is difficult to believe that the individuals described were schizophrenics, especially since they were the ones making the policies. Rather it seems more realistic, as others have noted (e.g. Reay 1959), to believe that these officials displayed a kindly communitarian public persona as a strategy to manipulate supporters and the public, but that for the most part, their real motivation was to ruthlessly increase their own power and self-benefits, just as most aggrandizers and sociopaths do even today. This is not to say that there may not have been some genuinely kind venerable patriarchs who wanted to do what was best for their kin and community. However, it is not possible to explain the use of terror, human sacrifices, and the acquisition of personal wealth and power in terms of kindly venerable patriarchs. If such leaders existed, when they entered secret societies they seem to have been outnumbered and powerless to go against the more highly motivated officials promoting their own interests.

#### ECONOMIC PATTERNS: SOURCES OF SUPPORT

There is a strong tradition in anthropology which views power as ultimately resulting from control over productive resources and consequently control over persons (White 1959; Marx and Engels 1968; Harris 1979; Wason 1994:35; Earle 1997; Levy 1992, 1994). This may be particularly true of kinship and corporate groups. However, secret societies generally owned no resources. Rather, it appears that the main focus was on other means of controlling people, and that this control was used to obtain desired resources. I have concluded that secret societies are above all predicated on the production (by others), control, and use of surplus resources (food and wealth) in order to benefit those people in control of the organization. Unfortunately, most of the ethnographies reveal little in terms of who actually provided the large quantities of food consumed in secret society feasts, both public and private. Much obviously came from the initiates and their supporting kin groups. It also appears from a few accounts that levies were placed on community households to provide food, labor, or other resources required for events and society support.

It is evident that the initiation and advancement costs were borne by individual families and their supporting kin groups, and that these resources went primarily to the high-ranking members of the societies, but may also have been used for general secret society needs. In some of the few observations on the finances of costly initiations, candidates borrowed resources from senior

*Suque* members at 100 percent interest. This seems likely to have been a widespread pattern. Thus, high initiation costs appear to have been a major means of leveraging food and wealth from other community members. It is not clear how the ritual paraphernalia and construction of furnishings for secret society structures were funded, especially since the more developed structures entailed considerable architectural elaboration and decoration. Presumably, these would have been underwritten by the same means as just mentioned; however, there is no concrete information on this issue that I have been able to find. Despite the lack of many details, it seems certain, as Harley (1941b:8) and others observed, that secret society demands were a form of extortion and were serious drains on the public's wealth. In sum, surpluses were obtained through initiation fees, consequent high interest loans, the selling of services and cult knowledge, general levies for rituals and feasts (ostensibly for the benefit of the community), and via control over trade or other economic activities.

#### OTHER FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

On the basis of the preceding discussions, I propose that we accept the basic premise that secret societies existed to dominate non-members and to achieve benefits for members, especially the highest ranking members, who were typically a select group of ambitious, manipulative, and largely self-centered, unprincipled individuals (i.e., aggrandizers). The creation of secret societies was only one of a suite of strategies used by such individuals to concentrate power and benefits in their own hands. A few of the other surplus-based strategies included feasting (with the attendant creation of reciprocal debts); high-priced marriages and investments in children's worth; burials for "respectable" people that required high-cost prestige items; the manufacture and specialized uses of prestige items; and the use of surpluses to acquire military allies.

Given the features described of power-oriented secret societies, anyone with ambitions, or anyone who wanted to protect themselves from social predators, was keen to become a member of secret societies. However, the price of membership to obtain such benefits was high in order to keep power concentrated and exclude people of lesser means. Typically, wealthy individuals, especially those who already had considerable power as heads of kin groups or other factions, became members of secret societies and ran them. Their goal was to extend their power and benefits beyond their kin group in order to acquire even more wealth from the high initiation and advancement fees that they charged new members.

#### *Advertising*

Since power was the primary goal and interest of these societies, they advertised their control over power on appropriate occasions, especially at initiations and

burials or feasts. They promoted secret society ideologies including their control over spirits, people, and wealth. Their displays and performances were competitively lavish in order to attract more members with wealth and power. Such displays sometimes went to the extreme of including human sacrifices, but almost always involved the sacrifice or consumption of numerous animals which represented wealth and provided greatly relished meat and fats. In addition to the public meetings and displays inside communities, secret societies also held more private meetings and ceremonies among themselves in remote locations.

### *Iconography*

Power animals featured prominently in secret society iconographies and ideologies to symbolize and materialize claims of personal and secret society powers including the ability of members to transform themselves into such power animals. The death of prominent society leaders was sometimes kept secret so as not to exhibit any weaknesses or diminished power in societies that claimed powers over life and death or even that sometimes claimed immortality for high-ranking members (Harley 1941b:7,9). High-ranking individuals were often buried in secret locations at secret times, and efforts were usually made to thwart others from carrying away body parts of dead leaders as sources of power.

### DYNAMICS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Max Weber's (1963:xxx) interest in religion was primarily as a source of social change, not as a conservative force for social stability. Such a role has been well documented in the preceding chapters in terms of the role of secret societies in promoting ideological changes, inequalities, and concentrations of wealth and power, controlling or influencing political positions, and extending the scope of control by establishing regional networks.

One of the more interesting aspects of this study has been the occasional glimpses into the foment of ritual organizations. Because power-oriented secret societies, or their upper ranks, were highly exclusive, many ambitious individuals must have been thwarted from joining and acquiring benefits. It is therefore understandable that such individuals could have formed their own secret societies as rival organizations. Authors documenting the secret societies of the American Plains, California, the Northwest Coast, and Central Africa, especially, have made references to the constant creation of new secret societies by ambitious individuals, only some of which succeeded. Other individuals who felt vulnerable to predatory attacks sometimes also formed defensive types of lower ranking secret societies with somewhat different characteristics from the main power-oriented secret societies. Thus, several secret societies

usually existed in the same community and may have either used common ritual structures at different times or had their own separate ritual structures dedicated to their specific secret societies. Alliances of several secret societies could exist, as in the Southwestern Pueblos, but rivalries were more typical. Rivalries sometimes resulted in fights between groups like the *Nimangki Tlel* lodges in Melakula with two or three cult structures near many villages (Deacon and Wedgewood 1934:437–8). In many areas, the rivalries to enlist wealthy powerful members resulted in ritual elements, or entire societies, that were constantly being enhanced, created *de novo*, or introduced by purchase from other communities. This created a highly fluid ritual-scape with high rates of change in details and diffusion comparable to the constant development and promotion of new clothing fashions or fads by different companies in industrial countries. Nevertheless, the basic elements that resonated and worked well in certain cultures seem to have remained stable, creating long-lasting and widespread ritual or cultural traditions or interaction spheres. Such traditions could encompass distinctive features such as medicine bundles, the “shooting” and reviving of initiates, the use of whistles or flutes and bullroarers as spirit voices, extended drumming/singing/dancing to induce SEEs, masked impersonations of spirits, semi-subterranean ritual lodges, physically stressful initiations, or other similar basic traits.

### *Regional Networks*

One of the goals of creating secret societies appears to have been to establish a higher level of control that transcended kinship or other groups. To ensure that all the most powerful contingents in communities were represented in secret societies, specific memberships or roles were often allocated to specific kin groups and were therefore hereditary in a broad sense. Many successful secret societies transcended community bounds and became loosely organized regional organizations that guaranteed safe passage, lodging, and admittance to rituals in neighboring or distant communities. Initiates were often physically marked, probably so that they could be recognized as initiates in locations where they were not personally known. Where charismatic and successful heads of secret societies emerged, these organizations could become more politically centralized, at least for part of the organizer’s lifetime.

### GENERAL CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH SECRET SOCIETIES DEVELOPED AND SPREAD

As originally suggested by Owens and Hayden (1997), it does not appear that secret societies were present in simple hunting and gathering cultures. There are no archaeological indications of their existence anywhere during the

Lower and Middle Paleolithic (with the possible intriguing exceptions in the deep caves of Bruniquel and Arcy-sur-Cure, and the remains at Hortus Cave), amounting to about 2.5 million years of prehistory. The only equivocal ethnographic examples that I encountered in the present review were from Arnhem Land and the southeastern areas of Australia, where richer environments could be argued to have supported more complex hunter/gatherers. In support of this general premise, Goldschmidt (1959:155–6) concluded that sodalities were absent in simple foraging societies but became increasingly important in mid-range societies such as those on the American Northwest Coast, in California, and in the horticultural societies of Melanesia, Africa, and North America. Similarly, Service (1963:xx–xxi) concluded that bands lacked special integrating mechanisms, but that tribes developed new integrative means such as sodalities. Secret societies were well attested among ethnographically complex hunter/gatherers and I have argued that they probably existed among some of the more complex hunter/gatherers of the Upper Paleolithic, particularly as represented by the elaborately painted caves (see Chapter 10).

If secret societies were created and used by aggrandizers as a surplus-based strategy to extend their power bases and create larger-scale political organizations, the occurrence among transegalitarian hunter/gatherers should play a pivotal role in understanding the origins of sociopolitical complexity. I need to re-emphasize that I make no claims for the universal use of this strategy among all transegalitarian hunter/gatherers or horticulturalists. Alternative types of organizations could serve similar functions, and, in fact, there were no good ethnographic accounts of secret societies among the Ainu (unless the bear sacrifice cult can be considered as such), the Tlingit (Drucker 1941:224–5), the Coast Salish (who Barnett (1955:214) claimed did not have shamanic fraternities or cooperative societies), or the complex hunter/gatherers of southeast or northern Australia (unless the *Djanggawul* cult described in Chapter 7 qualifies), or the Calusa of Florida, although data in these latter cases is very limited. Olson (1954:239) has even disputed their occurrence among the Kwakwakawakw communities that Boas (1897) described, perhaps owing to the use of different definitions. Nevertheless, secret societies are surprisingly well documented among the transegalitarian hunter/gatherers of western and northwestern North America.

Moreover, there appears to be a relationship between the development of complex hunting and gathering cultures in richer environments and the occurrence of secret societies that were prominent or dominant institutions in those cultures. In California, Bean and Vane (1978: 663) observed that religious institutionalization (by which they meant secret societies) correlated “markedly with economic and ecological potentials,” while Kroeber (1932:402,412,418) argued that the *Kuksu* Cult was a luxury that only people in prosperous areas could afford to support. This makes good sense in light of the high initiation

and other costs that characterize power-oriented secret societies. As discussed in Chapter 1, the occurrence of secret societies in complex hunter/gatherer societies and the association with productive potentials make sense from a political ecological perspective, since many aggrandizer strategies to acquire power were based on the production and use of surpluses. In the case of secret societies, the ability to pay for initiations and advancement was used to screen prospective members. The motivation for people to pay these prices appears to have been the prospect of gaining even greater wealth and power.

In addition to the environments and production technologies that could support the creation of surpluses on a regular basis, Webster (1932:136,160) argued that clan organization underlay all secret societies, thus making a clan kinship structure a precondition for tribal and secret society formation. The exact opposite was argued by Speiser (1996:302) and Ware (2014), who maintained that secret societies competed with clans for power and control. But Webster went on to suggest that with the development of secret societies, clan organization and its associated totemism disappeared since membership was not related to clans. He thus implied that secret societies took over the basic functions of clans (Webster 1932:146,152–3). In short, all three authors noticed strong trends for clans and secret societies to be mutually exclusive. This may not apply to Northwest Coast examples, where the guardian spirits of secret society members were derived from clans and inherited within clans (Webster 1932:151). Webster also thought that the multitude of secret societies was a recent phenomenon, together with human sacrifices and cannibalism (Webster 1932:126–7) – claims that have been contradicted by the archaeology of proposed secret society occurrences at Chavín, the American Southwest, Jerf el Ahmar, and other locations.

Few other scholars have considered conditions favorable for secret society developments. Those who have dealt with this issue have concentrated on colonial contexts from a sociological perspective which is not relevant to pre-historic situations. For instance, Simmel (1906:472) said that secret societies emerged everywhere as a correlate of despotism and of police control, and as a response to violent pressure of central powers. This does not seem pertinent to any transegalitarian contexts and is belied by the dominant political role of most power-oriented secret societies at this level.

As should be evident from the preceding discussions, I think it is unrealistic to maintain that cults or their rituals spread from one group to another because of the power of their beliefs. My position is in complete opposition to Weber's (1963:7) claim that "naturalistic religion" was displaced as a result of the success of "professional masters of symbolism" using their status to import vigor and intellectual elaboration to their beliefs together with the importance of magic in the economy. Rather, I endorse Aldenderfer's view that: "Ritual will be effective in the mediation of ... social relationships and the maintenance of

existing social categories *as long as most participants in the ritual process continue to get what they consider to be appropriate benefits, and have a reasonable expectation of continuing to do so*" (Aldenderfer 1993:8 – original italics).

What these benefits were, I suggest, related primarily to the acquisition of power and wealth or other desirable aspects (sex, security, sumptuous feasts) that secret society membership tantalizingly purported to provide.

## MAJOR THEORETICAL ISSUES

### *The Power of Belief and Ritual*

It is fashionable to maintain, as does Mann (1986:7, cited in Tefft 1992:24), that secret society leaders developed and maintained power through information control, or alternatively through their control over ritual items supposedly imbued with supernatural power (e.g., Vaughn 2005). However, such arguments leave out the most critical element in the creation of power: the source of power. Information control is only a technique. By itself, it lacks power. One can control information about what one dreamed last night, or the name of one's cat, but who cares? Moreover, if people do not believe the information or ideological mysteries that one is promoting (as typically occurs in at least 10 percent or more of traditional populations; see Chapter 1), there can be no power involved in secrets. In addition, there have been a number of indications that there was secret information "leakage" about the real nature of the spirit appearance and many other secret details (e.g., Bellman 1984:76,83).

Rather than the simplistic use of information control, the real key to power is the degree to which information can be promoted to others as important, together with the level of acquiescence that can be achieved in treating it as such even if it is not believed. Before specialists emerged, practical technological and subsistence knowledge would have been difficult to monopolize, notwithstanding Kelly's (2015) claims. In contrast, arcane knowledge was easy to monopolize but had no demonstrable practical consequences unless people could be persuaded or coerced to acquiesce to such claims. As documented in previous chapters (especially in Africa and Melanesia), often the "secret" being jealously guarded was simply that the claims to supernatural power were shams – smoke-and-mirror charades meant to delude non-initiates for the purpose of dominating political, social, and economic aspects of life by the most wealthy heads of kinship groups who were officials of secret societies. As has been seen, acquiescence to supernatural claims was enforced by terror tactics, indebtedness, public displays of putative supernatural powers, constantly promoting secret society ideologies, pressures on subordinate kin, and any other means possible. Control over access to information was a mere



formality, undoubtedly frequently honored by breaches and the inventions of counter-claims.

The notion that beliefs themselves – including beliefs in the power of some objects or the inherent power of rituals related to those beliefs – constituted the basis for power is simply unrealistic and leaves us wondering how such beliefs ever came to be accepted or even tolerated. It is more realistic to view “beliefs” (i.e., ideological claims) as only tools or pretexts. Indeed, some of the most powerful ecstatic experiences that linked individuals with putative supernatural entities or alternative realms have existed for thousands of years in groups like the Western Desert Australian Aboriginals, who underwent privations, tooth avulsion, circumcision, and subincision in rituals. It is difficult to imagine that any subsequent beliefs or rituals could have created more powerful experiences. However, these experiences among hunter/gatherers did not result in political power hierarchies, monumental ritual centers, or expensive ritual paraphernalia. If such beliefs and experiences were so compelling, why did they not spread everywhere?

The view that I espouse is that everywhere there is a mix of beliefs and claims about the supernatural held by individuals, which is like a quantum soup of beliefs exhibiting various probabilities of becoming more or less widely accepted based on many factors that change over time. In a similar vein, Barth (1987:82) described Ok cosmology and ritual in New Guinea as “an eternally changing and bubbling witch’s cauldron.” However, beliefs, or claims about the supernatural, were not simply individual predilections. In transegalitarian and more complex societies, some people wanted to promote certain interests, especially their own, and viewed claims about the supernatural as tools that could be used to achieve socioeconomic and political ends.

Strategies were thus developed to obtain acceptance or acquiescence for certain beliefs that could support social sanctions, justify material success, warrant ownership or inheritances, or legitimize demands for contributions to feasts and rituals for the putative good of the community. Acceptance based on charismatic persuasion was certainly one strategy that must have repeatedly worked; however, such developments must have always been short lived, dying out with the demise of specific charismatic leaders. Other reasons for widespread and more enduring acquiescence or acceptance can probably be found in economic benefits (especially debt-related), reproductive advantages, kinship considerations, and coercive pressures brought to bear by promoters of specific ideologies and their descendants or supporters. Chance and coincidence may also have played important roles, as when the outcomes of battles or disasters were linked to specific ideologies. Appeals to beliefs or ideologies to explain major changes in ritual behavior and iconography rarely if ever acknowledge the diversity of beliefs in communities. Advocates of prehistoric ideological causality never address questions of who

promoted specific beliefs or how acquiescence to such claims was achieved for any segment of a population.

Although Flannery (1999:15–17) and others have criticized appeals to ideology to explain the emergence of more complex societies, in archaeology and even anthropology, there has been repeated recourse to the power of beliefs and rituals as the explanation for great ritual architecture or other cultural developments. In the Middle East, Byrd (2005:266–7) thought that leaders developed an increasing ability “to garner greater power and authority by conducting elaborate rituals, maintaining control over ritual knowledge and paraphernalia.” Hodder (2010a:340,348,353; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:142) argued that it was not a change in technology or modes of production that led to centralized polities in Mesopotamia, but a change in religious rituals and spiritual life. Even domestication in the Near East has been attributed to a change in beliefs (Cauvin 2000; Watkins 2010; Sterelny and Watkins 2015).

In the New World, Potter (2000:296), Vaughn (2005), and others have argued that in contrast to economic factors, the control of esoteric knowledge or ritual objects was the source of power for creating social hierarchies. This view has also been endorsed by a number of ethnographers of the Pueblos (Lamphere 2000; Heitman 2016). In the Eastern Woodlands, Emerson et al. (2003:308; Pauketat and Emerson 1997) maintained that “ideologies were a dominant part, perhaps a central impetus, for the creation of the Cahokian phenomenon.” For Joyce and Barber (2015:835) religion was a constraining factor on cultural development owing to “the ensoulment of public buildings, the storage of the remains of ancestors, and the centrality of rulers in relation to the divine.” Similar views have been expressed about Casas Grandes (Whalen and Minnis 2001). For the Early Formative of South America, Núñez et al. (2017:913) thought that “the rise of a set of ideas ... permitted and validated the rise of a proto elite.”

In England, Parker Pearson (2007:142; Parker Pearson et al. 2006:234–5) thought that a “millenarian zeal in which people from across Britain must have participated in a religiously inspired remodeling of cosmology” motivated people to congregate at Durrington Walls and to undertake the massive construction of Stonehenge three kilometers away. Racheting up the scale, Nelson (2008:146,228) argued that “religious power was the central pillar of political authority” (146,151) for early Chinese and other oriental state rulers.

For this ideological school of thought, the collapse of complex polities was equally to be sought in the realm of beliefs, or the failure of beliefs to produce promised harvests. For instance, Drennan (1976:360–4), following Heizer (UCECMIL 1963), explained the Olmec collapse as due to the founding of Olmec elite power on a belief system promising good harvests, followed by disenchantment with the belief in the powers of the elites after poor harvests. Bruce Smith, in *Myth of the Moundbuilders* (as stated in Chedd 1981), used the

same logic to explain the collapse of the Mississippian Mound centers in the central United States. Explanations have become more obtuse in some cases, as with appeals to “ensoulment,” belief “entrapments,” and “social stress” (Joyce and Barber 2015), but they all share the same ideological causality framework.

One of the classic areas where the power of belief and ritual has been advanced as unconnected to economic factors has been the American Southwest (Lamphere 2000; Heitman 2016). However, Levy (1992, 1994) has clearly shown that key power relationships occurred at the clan level, rather than at the individual level, and that clans controlled productive land as well as the priests and ceremonies which were costly and which the clans underwrote. It may have been the priesthood that controlled resources, but it was the clans that controlled the priesthood. As argued here and in feasting studies (Hayden 2014, 2016), clans or other factional kinship groups could place figureheads (who themselves may not have been rich or powerful) in positions of power to do the bidding of the real clan power holders who remained out of public scrutiny. Although everyone admits that ritual knowledge was the superficial rhetoric used by those in power to justify or warrant their positions, the claims of ritual-based power should be put to rest. The power of ritual knowledge is, in fact, a common characteristic of chieftdom rhetoric and ideology, undoubtedly with roots in the transegalitarian traditions established by aggrandizers (Earle 2002:66; Hayden and Villeneuve 2010; Hayden 2014:58, 64, 241–2).

### *Communitarian versus Aggrandizer Models*

A recurring theme in this book has been the major difference between the system-serving communitarian interpretation of rituals versus the largely self-serving motivations of ambitious aggrandizers. The dominant view throughout most of the archaeological world has been that prehistoric rituals were used to integrate people. This is basically a functionalist and communitarian type of explanation for ritual elaboration in prehistory. This view has undoubtedly been inherited from the British structural-functionalist and other functionalist schools of the mid-twentieth century. It is epitomized by MacKenzie (1967:26) who argued that in primitive societies “subgroups work toward the achievement of a healthy society.” In the functionalist paradigm, all major organizations had to contribute to the effective functioning of a society as a whole. In archaeology, this largely translated into viewing art and ritual as existing to socially integrate large communities or large seasonal aggregations into large harmonious groups (e.g., Mellars (1994:75; 2009:223–4), although, to be fair, Mellars also stated that ritual could be used to reinforce the power and authority of high-status individuals who emerged in the aggregations of large groups).

In the American Southwest, Saitta (2013, 2015:534) has been one of the strongest communitarian advocates. He argued that it was “reasonable to conceptualize the various specialists involved in land management, warfare, and religious sanctification as communal subsumed classes supported by collectively mobilized surpluses.” Among many others, C. Adams (1989:158), Adler (1989:42), and Potter (2000) following Longacre (1964) and Hill (1966) assumed that the function of ritual structures in the Southwest and elsewhere was to integrate social groups – a view critiqued by Ware (2014:52,75,93,121), who noted that integrative views have been based on the misconceptions that Pueblo societies were egalitarian, and they have ignored the role of ritual in obtaining political power and building social hierarchies.

In the Andes, Stanish (2013) argued that rituals established taboos, schedules, and feasts to improve and coordinate socioeconomic cooperation. More recently, Stanish (2017:75) has characterized me as maintaining that “because there are aggressive people in any society who act in their own self-interest, there must be substantial coercion in all societies.” I have never ever held this view. It is a blatant distortion of my arguments that a variety of strategies were used by aggrandizers to manipulate (not coerce) people because of the social constraints involved. Nor did I ever argue that “only the leaders benefit.” Leaders certainly have to provide some benefits to followers as I have made clear in this and previous publications. Stanish (2017:68) is ideologically wed to a communitarian position in which “coercive social power by one group over another did not develop historically until state societies took hold.” While this may be true for some groups, it is certainly not true of the communities reviewed in this book in which people were terrorized or killed if they opposed elite wishes, and in which chiefs could be mere puppets. Nor does Stanish take into account the widespread occurrence of slavery, often the result of inability to pay gambling debts in North American native cultures (Cameron and Johansson 2017). His idealistic view that leaders must be pro-social is roundly contradicted by the many accounts of anti-social behavior of secret society leaders documented in previous chapters.

Elsewhere, Whitehouse and Lanman (2014), and many others maintained that rituals were created to fuse individual identities with social groups. Zori and Brant (2012:418) proposed that rituals were a type of risk management since they were used to bring people together to share food and conduct trade. Peebles and Kus (1977:430) also proposed that chiefs relied on sanctified authority rather than power, and that this sanctified authority was conferred upon them because of community needs for rapid, flexible responses to new conditions, especially given larger populations and greater need for a means to buffer environmental fluctuations. Along similar lines, Blanton and Fargher (2008) have argued that collective action without any coercion was responsible for the creation of cities, monumental architecture, and early states.

Sterelny and Watkins (2015:681–2) elaborated the functionalist argument by proposing that as communities grew in size during the Neolithic, there was an increased “need for developed norms of behavior,” resulting in “the increasing investment in ideological infrastructure” (Sterelny and Watkins 2015:681) and “increasing intensity, diversity and scale of ritual practices, symbolic representations and monuments” that “reinforce the identity of the community” (682). Similar scenarios to the above have been used to explain rituals as emerging to deal with social stresses in the larger communities in the Natufian and Prepottery Neolithic (PPN) settlements (see Chapter 10). In addition, the same kinds of arguments have been advocated to explain secondary burial rituals as a means to promote equality and community solidarity (Kuijt 1996, 2000:145,148). However, in stark contrast to this interpretation, secondary burials have been shown to result from the promotion of wealthy elite interests rather than for community integration (Hayden 2009, 2014).

Similar issues have been central to the interpretation of prehistoric feasting. In both feasting and ritual domains, a number of prehistorians and ethnographers have criticized the functional approach to explaining the appearance of complexity (Ruyle 1973; Roscoe 2000:114). On the Northwest Coast, it has been shown that secret societies were socially divisive rather than integrative (Drucker 1941:225). This was equally true on the Great Plains, in West Africa, and in Melanesia. At a more general level, Tefft (1980b:67) has argued, it was social divisiveness rather than social unity that created conditions under which secrecy thrived, and that secrecy further aggravated social antagonisms. It then makes sense that, in Taos pueblo, the use of secrecy in ritual societies was intimately tied up with political factionalism (Brandt 1980:144). Gilman and Stone (2013:610) further observed that ritual was a prime target of manipulation in the Southwest.

Thus, one of the major conclusions of the present study has been that secret societies were *not* established in order to ameliorate social stresses or to better integrate communities. Instead, they were created and run by ambitious individuals in order to further the self-interests of organizers, and to the extent necessary, the interests of supporters or others in the society. In this respect, they were only integrative for their memberships, and even then, ranking was competitive and hierarchical. Secret societies acted to increase inequalities and competition in communities, and to this extent they were more divisive than integrative. This has been repeatedly and explicitly stated by ethnographers in previous chapters.

In addition, Boas (1897:663) maintained that the “source of the ritual ... must be looked for in the advantages and the prerogatives which the membership of secret societies gives.” However, Boas did not provide any detailed description of what those advantages and prerogatives were. On the other hand, Drucker (1941:225–7) explicitly stated that ritual roles were highly correlated

with secular roles, and that the function of secret societies was to dominate society; their maintenance was favorable “to the dominant elements of aboriginal society.” The ultimate effect, according to Drucker, was schismatic and disintegrative rather than integrative. This is entirely expectable in terms of accentuating rank conflicts and the competition between individuals and groups for power. After working with the Gitksan, John Adams (1973:113) concluded that the chiefs used expensive secret dance societies to exclude non-elites and to form an oligarchy that protected each others’ interests.

#### STEPPING STONES TO ESTABLISHING INSTITUTIONAL RELIGIONS?

In contrast to the shamanistic rituals of many foragers, secret society organizations and the more complex institutionalized religious organizations in chiefdoms and early states bear some striking resemblances. Shamans in foraging societies usually worked solo, lacked a corporate or institutionalized framework, became shamans owing to inner aptitudes such as entering trance states, and often developed skills by themselves without formal training or costs based on wealth. Secret societies differed in these and other respects. Moreover, secret societies formed a critical part of chiefdom political organizations, at the very least in Africa. Is it possible that more complex religious organizations at the early state level (or even world religious organizations) developed out of secret societies? Early Maya, Sumerian, Chinese, and Egyptian state priesthoods continued a very close relationship between elite types of religious and political rule.

Common characteristics of secret societies and early state priesthoods included a probably voluntary but exclusive and wealthy membership, especially in the upper ranks; memberships that cross-cut kinship and probably community social groups covering large geographical areas; a hierarchical structure; religious authority that stemmed from formal training and payments rather than from innate abilities to contact the supernatural (if secret society members did not always fit the full definition of “priests,” they were certainly proto-priests); all state religions represented elite ideologies (often with political leaders portrayed as incarnate gods) rather than representing the ritual life of common people; they claimed to have special connections with supernatural forces which were said to be critical for the well-being or survival of the communities; requirements for exotic prestige paraphernalia for rituals and for impressive architecture for their rituals; a frequent emphasis on frightening supernatural beings, mythical animal forms, and human sacrifices; and an ability to wield considerable power, although how and why that was done has always been rather vague. In ethnographic transegalitarian and chiefdom societies, secret societies rarely produced grandiose edifices that greatly exceeded normal house architecture, with a few exceptions. However, most secret societies had

some (even notable) architectural elaboration. In early states, with the greater control over resources and labor of state-level administrations, ritual edifices usually ballooned out of all proportion to normal residences.

Ethnographers have not always ignored the implications of secret societies in respect to developments of more complex religions. In California, Bean and Vane (1978:663) noted that a number of regions had a “more priest like role for religious specialists” since knowledge was from formal education rather than personal callings and experiences.

#### STEPPING STONES TO ESTABLISHING STATE-LEVEL POLITICAL SYSTEMS?

Archaeologists generally acknowledge that rituals and religion were somehow related to political development, although this is usually not clearly conceptualized, or at best is phrased in terms of the power of beliefs or of tactics to conceal the real nature of inequalities (e.g., Harris 1979; Dietler 2001:70; Gamble 2012). Along these lines, a number of authors have observed that shrines could be transformed into political and economic centers (Werbner 1977:xxiv; Eickelman 1977:7; Sallnow 1987:8; Vreeland 1991:232), while McCorriston (2011:42,50,74,221) viewed the pilgrimage shrines as playing “a critical ideological role in the economic and social functioning of Southern Arabian city-states” and probably the growth of these states (42). In Sara Nelson’s book *Shamanism and the Origin of States* (2008:146–7,151,228), the early Chinese kings were depicted as “the great shaman,” ruling their domains on the basis of their claims of access and influence in the spirit realms resulting from their ritual knowledge and the sacrifices that they could make – in my view, a rather dubious interpretation of causality. So, what might be the links between secret societies and political complexity?

Even at the level of complex hunter/gatherers, Bean and Vane (1978:663) argued that “these major religious systems [types of secret societies in California] may also have been devices for political expansion.” They also note that there were regional ritual centers (as there were in West African secret societies, and probably other examples of secret societies). Such regional centers could form the nucleus of regional political control. Similarly, in the horticultural societies of the Banks Islands, “high chiefs” sometimes also held the highest ranked positions in secret societies which gave them incomparably increased power, even though this may always have been constrained by other high-ranking members of the secret society (Walter 1969:94).

Webster (1932:175) suggested that trained priesthoods could develop from successful secret societies operating in conjunction with chiefly or kingly political control, as exemplified by the *Whare Kura* in New Zealand and the *Ogboni* of the Yoruba where the political head was the chief of the priests.



Netting (1972:220,233–4) made the general argument that, in Africa, ritual constituted the basis for expanded polities. Indeed, ritual roles “occupy the crucial integrating position in the concept of leadership ... religious modes of focusing power are often primary in overcoming the critical structural weaknesses of stateless societies” (Netting 1972:233). More pointedly, Mann (1986:172, cited in Tefft 1992:12–20) maintained that “State power strategies are merely centralized versions of power found in secret society organizations or other social structures.”

In general terms, Webster (1932:75,107,121–3) proposed that, initially, secret societies provided “important political and judicial functions” to supplement government rulers, although it would seem that secret societies may, to begin with, have functioned to provide social and political control where there were no chiefs or only weak chiefs. Walter (1969:99) raised the interesting point that secret societies could not oversee all the daily administrative affairs of their communities owing to their intermittent meetings and their inability to publicly manifest spirits all of the time. Alternatively, they may have wanted to disguise the real sources of power in communities. Thus, they needed a puppet civil administration in the form of chiefs to exercise power and control over daily affairs. Harley (1941b:31) advanced a similar argument, viewing chiefs as essentially puppets of the secret society leaders. In fact, on the American Plains, it was the secret societies that created chiefly positions (see Chapter 5). Indeed, the same strategy may have been used in some or many transegalitarian villages. In the case of the Akha hill tribe villages in northwest Thailand where I worked, the public administrative figurehead (the *dzuma*) was “the mouth-piece of god,” while other officials constituted a voluntary, ranked, ritual, and political organization that essentially did the bidding of the powerful individuals on the village council representing the major factions in the village. It was the village figurehead, the *dzuma*, who enforced the many taboos and was supposed to defend the village against supernatural threats, but he was not the source of power or decision-making; the village council was (Hayden 2016:71).

### *Constraints*

As Speiser (1996:306) observed, the constant competition between high-ranking individuals in the *Suque* Societies must have disadvantaged many secret societies in the consolidation of power on a larger scale. While the highest ranking member of the *Suque* Society held influence over districts, there was a constant change in affiliated villages due to the endemic competition and rivalries for the highest positions, with ritual-based political organizations falling apart as soon as leaders died so that political organizations were very unstable. These were also characteristics of simple chiefdoms that Beck (2003:643,656) has described and that I helped to document in Polynesia (Hayden and Villeneuve

2010). Walter (1969:97) also observed that the rivalries between 20 officials in West Africa – with incessant attempts to poison each other – prevented any stable concentration of power. Thus, in many cases, the intense competition for power within and between secret societies may have been the major constraint on developing more complex political organizations, unless some means could be found to overcome this competitive constraint. However, such competitive disintegration would surely also be characteristic of purely political attempts to consolidate power between ambitious aggrandizers or factions.

Using the *Poro* as an example, Lowie (1962) viewed the secret society as a key link to the development of political centralization. However, like Speiser, he also maintained that secret societies created divisions within regions and that rivalries prevented individuals from acquiring enough power to establish states, so that other factors also had to be involved in the emergence of states. Although these other factors were never elucidated by Lowie, Walter (1969:101) suggested that chiefs' military roles may have been critical conditions in state emergence. Walter (1969:79) thought that Lowie's inquiry was a dead end because he neglected the characteristic use of terror by secret societies. Walter thought that states could form via alternative pathways such as the creation of communitarian constitutions, via the use of terror by despots, or via the creation of oligarchies from secret societies that transcended kinship and local loyalties (80–1).

In this last scenario, secret societies were viewed as critical in the emergence of political complexity because they provided “a legitimate source of coercion and violence” that attracted chiefs and elders of kinship groups (Walter 1969:82). They constituted an oligarchy that “worked as specialists in terror” (82). The highest *Poro* positions were “postgraduate” terrorists and “experts in fright” (94). The widespread and flagrant use of terror in early states and complex chiefdoms (Dickson 2006), including the Zulu state that Walter discusses, and the mass executions that took place as part of elite Sumerian or other early state burials seem to support this contention, and seem to echo common secret society practices. Vaillant (1947, cited in Ware 2014:195), too, argued that the Aztec centralized political organization (based on human sacrifices) originated from warfare and ritual sodalities.

Obviously, there are other possible scenarios in which religion and ritual might have played important roles in the emergence of complex polities. Among the most commonly invoked factors have been the roles that pilgrimage organizations may have played in political developments. These will be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

### *Regional Organization*

One of the most important aspects of state-level elite religious organizations was the ability to involve select community members on a regional

geographical scale. Similarly, regional organization was a striking feature of most, if not all, secret societies. As Wedgewood (1930:142) stated: “the secret society cuts across the bounds of family, clan, village, and even district. It serves as a means of bringing together men who otherwise would be opposed or indifferent to each other ... it serves as a unifying force and as a means whereby men are brought into social relations with others outside their normal sphere of contact.” Thus, Wedgewood viewed secret societies as an important stimulus to “cultural development.” Moreover, secret societies exhibited more power and cohesion than kinship groups or tribes, according to Webster (1932:106).

Hereditary rights to certain membership roles – and probably priestly positions – would have ensured that overall memberships cross-cut kinship or local groups and thus were capable of drawing on many kinship or community groups for labor and resources. This was true for secret societies on the American Northwest Coast, for the *Ogboni* of the Yoruba, for the Banks Island secret societies, and probably for early state-level secret societies, thus enhancing the ability of leaders to maintain political dominance in communities (Tefft 1980c:324).

My view is that archaeologically this regional networking of secret society members was reflected in regional art styles and motifs, although the nature of regional art motifs of secret societies was not usually documented in any systematic fashion in most ethnographies and, thus, has not been closely examined in this analysis. Regional ritual integration might also be reflected in decreased levels of warfare, as suggested by Kohler et al. (2014), who attributed decreasing levels of violence in the American Southwest after 1100 CE largely to the importance of inter-Pueblo ritual sodalities, i.e., secret societies.

Tangentially, it might be emphasized that the reason for the development of scarification (and perhaps secret or ritual languages) was probably, at least in part, in order to verify claims on a regional scale of unknown people from other communities that they had, in fact, become initiates of a given secret society. Webster (1932:107) noted that in Africa, those with these traits were well received wherever they went.

Thus, the study of secret societies may have important implications for the development of chiefdoms and state-level political organizations. Secret societies represent the first institutionalized manifestation of ritual organizations linked to political power, and, indeed, this may have been one of the initial intended goals for organizing secret societies. Given this perspective, it is more understandable why chiefs and early kings were central figures in ritual performances. Secret societies may constitute the missing link in understanding why religion (rather than military forces, trade associations, expanded kinship links, or other cultural domains) played such a prominent role in the development of chiefdoms and early states.

### *Archaeological Instances*

Given these suggestions, it is worth considering whether important archaeological examples of early monumental ritual centers might not represent just such evolved types of secret societies. As suggested in Chapter 10, Göbekli Tepe, Chavín de Huántar, the Chacoan great houses, Stonehenge and a few other megalithic centers, the major Olmec ritual centers of San Lorenzo and La Venta, Minoan peak sanctuaries, the early Greek sanctuaries that later gave rise to the mystery cults like those at Eleusis, the major ritual centers of Neolithic China, and many other large ritual centers that occur immediately before the emergence of state organizations, could represent just such evolved regional secret society organizations. I suggest that such centers can be referred to as “Super Secret Society Regional Polities.” Why such prehistoric ritual centers emerged and featured so prominently in terms of cost, labor, and architectural grandiosity has always puzzled archaeologists. Causal explanations have traditionally tended to stop at the power of beliefs, but secret societies provide much deeper practical insights into how such power was acquired with the use of surpluses and by using supernatural warrants based on terror.

### *Subsequent Developments*

With increased political centralization, Webster (1932:75,121–3) thought that the political and judicial functions of secret societies became obsolete, resulting in the transformation of such societies. He thought that it became increasingly difficult to maintain control over power via the use of “mysteries,” so that secret societies either collapsed entirely or degenerated into social clubs, theatrical dance troupes providing amusement, or fraternities with limited powers (Webster 1932:121–3,135,172). Whatever the specific scenario of development, a number of researchers view a conflict or dialectic of opposed interests as developing within secret societies between political administrators and those who claimed supernatural powers. This internal struggle has sometimes been portrayed as being resolved by the formation of an alliance between the contending factions, in which the ritual aspects of the secret society became an agent of the administrators who gradually consolidated their control or power and went on to become chiefs or kings (Webster 1932:108–9 cited a number of examples).

The devolution in importance was especially typical in colonial situations, with pressures from missionaries and colonial governments to eliminate secret societies. For Webster one indication of the colonially induced decline of secret societies was the admission of women. Thurnwald (cited by Wedgewood 1930) argued that political centralization, and in particular, “the emergence of chieftainship and kinship seems on the whole to bring about the decay of secret

societies.” However, Walter (1969:78) espoused a different scenario, whereby when chiefs entered into power struggles between themselves and secret societies, it resulted in the co-option and transformation of secret societies rather than their destruction. In his argument, secret societies became agents of paramount chiefs or kings, as happened in Sierra Leone, southwest Nigeria (the Oyo kingdom), and west Cameroon (the Kom kingdom) where the secret society masked spirit impersonators operated as the king’s police force and also effectively eliminated his rivals. Not all West African states followed this pattern (102–7), but these examples establish another evolutionary pathway from secret societies to state religions and polities. Archaeologically, the Phoenician city states and colonies may represent this kind of development since the temples of Melqart were the major locations for commercial transactions and constituted the major links between politics and economics (Aubet 1993:234). Priests played major roles and had considerable power. They were recruited from the most important families, with the high priest and priestess being from the royal family (Aubet 1993:128–9). As has been well established, infant sacrifices were part of the rituals, perhaps originating from secret society practices.

Interestingly, Walter also thought that secret societies played more important roles in smaller kingdoms but tended to be much less central in larger states (Walter 1969:102–3). Nevertheless, combined political-religious secret society systems could exercise control over millions of people as in the Yoruba case (106–7). Thus, as population density, community size, and political control continued to increase, several authors postulate that secret societies became eclipsed.

It is interesting to consider similar kinds of processes operating in the Minoan archaeological record where peak sanctuaries were important regional ritual centers (plausibly of secret societies), until the palaces came to prominence at which point they were abandoned (Hayden 2014:319–22). A similar development occurred in Sumeria where the early temples that dominated urban centers (potentially representing evolved secret societies) ceded their power to palaces.

In view of the above arguments, it is interesting to note that Loeb (1929:283) considered many of the Greek mystery religions as secret society organizations, including the Orphic, Dionysian, Eleusinian, and Isisian cults with their masks and promises of resurrection after death. In a number of cases, the main ritual centers of these cults were eventually taken over by city-state authorities and run for the benefit of those states (Jacob 1945).

#### PILGRIMAGE MODELS FOR RITUAL CENTERS

Perhaps the most common interpretations by archaeologists of the more complex, specialized, or regional ritual centers have been that they were “pilgrimage” centers. This has certainly been true of Chavín de Huántar, Chaco, Gilat in the Levant, the Niheliang sites in China, and sites in southern Arabia (Sallnow 1987:93–4; Lumbreras 1989; Burger 1992:193–4; Levy 2006;

McCorrison 2011:219–21; Drennan et al. 2017). However, invoking “pilgrimage” as the underlying reason for the existence of these and other centers really does not explain anything in terms of the underlying forces responsible for their creation. The appeal to pilgrimages largely seems to have rested on the assumption by archaeologists that it was the belief in the supernatural power of these sites that created them. There has been little discussion of how such beliefs might have become established or acquired such power (for important exceptions, see Levy 2006 and McCorrison 2011). Nor has there been much recognition of the diversity, dynamics, and complexity of pilgrimage behavior as a phenomenon (an exception again being Levy 2006).

The pilgrimage model often has implied an almost innate urge by people to make contact with the supernatural, to find supernatural solutions to their problems, and to be willing to expend vast energies and resources to try to do so. Given previous discussions, such assumptions appear dubious. Moreover, archaeologists seldom discuss what the motives might be for organizing or participating in pilgrimages, much less what practical benefits might be obtained by organizers or participants. The rather vague notion of popular pilgrimage centers with pilgrimages undertaken by masses of non-elite worshippers stands in contrast to the regional centers of secret society cults used by elites that have been documented in the preceding chapters. I would therefore like to take some time to explore the pilgrimage phenomenon.

### *Types of Pilgrimages*

When consulting some of the classic case studies of pilgrimages, it immediately becomes apparent that there was considerable diversity in motives, organization, and benefits. There were pilgrimages organized by conquering state administrators to demonstrate fealty, render tribute, or to promote their own ideologies, whether Christian or pre-Christian (Adams 1991:117–19; Morinis and Crumrine 1991; Nolan 1991). There were also popular pilgrimages that served to resist outside domination (Konrad 1991:131; Schryer 1991:359). But, like secret societies based on resistance to outside rule, both of these pilgrimage types really occurred only in societies that were far more complex than the transegalitarian or chiefly political organizations that are the focus of this book.

Aside from these instances, the major reasons for organizing pilgrimages that can be deduced from pilgrimage studies in Africa, Latin America, and Europe are as follows.

### *Networking and Mutual Help Relationships*

These typically involved multiple tribal or social groups that could compete or cooperate with each other concerning such things as trade, warfare, access

to resources, or help in times of need. Marx (2006:63–8) and McCorriston (2011:50) described the Bedouin pilgrimages in these terms, as did Werbner (1977:xiii,xix) for African centers and Sallnow (1991:304) for native pilgrimages to remote Andean sites that structured political and economic relationships between interacting groups. Typically these pilgrimage centers were located between tribal or other sociopolitical boundaries and did not feature commercial merchants, although some commodity exchanges could take place. Competition was often an undercurrent between social groups, whether villages or kinship groups, sometimes displayed in ritual battles and violence at pilgrimage sites, but sometimes kept at bay by invoking the sacred nature of the locations (Sallnow 1987:96–7, 138–41, 203, 268; McCorriston 2011:38, 40).

While the ideology and the travel contexts for the pilgrims might be egalitarian (to encourage participation), the sites were often owned or managed by elites (McCorriston 2011:42, Sallnow 1987:2–3, 215, 235, 268; 1991:281; Silverman 1991:227), and it was clear that the intergroup negotiations and arrangements were restricted to sociopolitical leaders who stood to benefit most from the event and who controlled its mythology, rituals, and organization. Large numbers of people were encouraged to go on these pilgrimages, probably in order to show a strong presence and support for intergroup negotiations. Followers were lured into participation with the prospect of spiritual or material rewards (Sallnow 1991:335), and probably also to provide participants with personal connections that could be useful.

### *Creation of Tribal or Group Identity*

This has been a recurring theme that has usually been portrayed as including all classes from the participating communities (Turner and Turner 1978, in McCorriston 2011:158, 221; Crumrine 1991:88; Morinis and Crumrine 1991:16). However, it is difficult to imagine anyone organizing a pilgrimage or promoting a pilgrimage center, or even participating in a pilgrimage, primarily for the communitarian purpose of establishing a social or ethnic identity. In fact, Sallnow (1987:268) flatly denied that Andean pilgrimages created any significant “*communitas*” spirit (contra Turner and Turner 1978) owing to the inherent conflicts, antagonisms, and hierarchical rivalries among the organizers and participants. If group identity was ever a major concern, it would be far more likely to be promoted by ambitious leaders who needed labor, products, and combatants. Such people would have promoted group identities to enhance their own undertakings or to protect their own positions.

### *Territorial Maintenance*

Richard Ford (personal communication) indicated that one of the principal reasons for undertaking pilgrimages in the American Southwest was to reaffirm



ties and assert claims to territory. These pilgrimages consisted of organized annual visits to mountaintop shrines 22–150 miles away. Their purpose was to monitor the clan range or protect people from enemies, whether physical or spiritual. Sodalities (secret societies) had different shrines and different rituals at shrines, but all pilgrimages were purportedly for the benefit of the community, although individuals were supposed to obtain power from the rituals at the shrines.

### *Acquisition of Power*

Pilgrimages organized in order to create or consolidate political types of power were well attested and could take a variety of forms including:

- secret society “pilgrimages” to regional centers (as in West Africa) or to remote power shrines (as in the American Southwest);
- long-distance pilgrimages involving only the elites (Harvey 1991:102–3);
- pilgrimages undertaken to affirm or demonstrate the organizational abilities and/or sociopolitical connections of individuals, which then enabled “individuals to attain prestige cargos” within their own community (Silverman 1991:226). These may also characterize the annual “centripetal” pilgrimages of hinterland villages to religious-political centers, often at high cost to the pilgrimage organizers (Sallnow 1987:158–63, 178–97).

Although there may have been a veneer of egalitarian sharing during some pilgrimages (Sallnow 1987:2–3), the rituals were often political acts and social dramas that maintained hierarchical structures, with some pilgrimages emphasizing hierarchies within groups (Silverman 1991:226; see also Poole 1991:334). In many cases, people were encouraged to participate in pilgrimages by proffering spiritual or material benefits (Sallnow 1991:335). Pilgrimages to Moroccan *marabout* centers also affirmed the cult custodian’s special relation to god and his control of supernatural forces, as well as the custodian’s right to collect fees (sometimes acrimoniously) for hosting rituals and feasts (Eickelman 1977).

### *Livelihood*

Many pilgrimage centers were established and promoted as businesses, or as a means of eking out a livelihood. Some accounts noted that the organizers were not particularly rich or powerful. As cults and shrines based on leaders acting as mediums, they offered to provide cures for stock and people, oracular advice, relief from droughts, or personal advice/prognostications that emerged in séances (Colson 1977:120, 123–5, 134; Van Binsbergen 1977:154–5). They could draw clients from 100 miles away, and they were often located along

major travel routes (Werbner 1977:xix), presumably to attract more clients or pilgrims. These types of pilgrimage centers were especially common in Africa (Werbner 1977:xxxiv–v) and characteristically involved the payment of fees for services, competition between shrines, and ephemeral existences based on the charisma of founding individuals without any provision for creating an ongoing organization (Colson 1977:134). Starting such shrines might appeal to those with great aspirations since they had the potential of attracting a regional following and considerable wealth (far beyond what village farmers could obtain), but such success was undoubtedly rare and most shrines remained small and undistinguished.

Nevertheless, it appears that very successful cults of this nature could be taken over by more powerful interests thanks to their ability to generate revenues and influence people (Morinis and Crumrine 1991:8; Vreeland 1991:240). They thus could become transformed into power-based popular pilgrimage centers, where wealth displays were used as indications of miracles and healing powers and there was severe competition both between and within shrines for pilgrims and control, thus becoming a power-based type of shrine (Sumption 1975:151–3, 165–6). Of course, the more opulent the displays of past successes and cures, the more effective the power of suggestion would be in subsequent cures as a result of placebo effects. Thus, success could breed success. Such examples seem to be what archaeologists have in mind when they interpret major prehistoric ritual centers as pilgrimage sites. The proliferation of such pilgrimage centers could be compared to the many “start-up” secret societies of the American Great Plains mentioned in Chapter 5, which were usually also short lived, although a few could exhibit remarkable success.

In Nigeria, Talbot (1923:39–56) described sacred pools, trees, and *Juju* shrines usually located in the forest, but with a priest or guardian and small structures with paraphernalia (primarily drums and statues). These localities sometimes had regional reputations and people came to them for cures or favors, paying the priest. Although such journeys were referred to as “pilgrimages,” it is unclear as to whether these were organized group events (as in Latin America) or simply individual journeys undertaken to obtain supernatural succor. They seem most likely to be small-scale start-up attempts to establish more important and profitable pilgrimage centers by individuals trying to derive a livelihood from people seeking cures or favors.

### *General Economic Benefits*

A major reason for holding another type of pilgrimage appears to have been related to subsistence or other economic activities like merchandising. Especially in Latin America, native pilgrimages often occurred in remote areas

at boundaries between ecological zones that produced different types of foods (e.g., herding versus agriculture), and they occurred at times coinciding with harvests (Poole 1982:92–3, 101–4, 106; Sallnow 1991:287), although this may simply have been because people had more time and resources after harvests. Large-scale exchange of foodstuffs may not always have occurred during such pilgrimages (and market-like merchandising of industrial or prestige items was not a feature), but relationships could be forged or affirmed that subsequently led to such exchanges, thereby unifying regional economies of production and exchange (Poole 1982:106).

In contrast to all of the above indigenous types of pilgrimages, Christian-based pilgrimages, and probably some pre-colonial state-level pilgrimages, tended to be located in or near urban centers and organized so as to promote markets and merchandising, thus resembling European saints' day village fairs, with pilgrims essentially acting like tourists, as effectively portrayed by Chaucer (see also Sumption 1975:211, 257; Poole 1982:107–8; Sallnow 1987:90–4).

### *Discussion*

I have focused on the motives of the organizers of pilgrimages or shrines because it is they who initiated and controlled the events and stood to obtain the greatest benefits from them. The motives of the participants obviously varied over a much wider spectrum as documented by Chaucer, from hopes for cures or resolutions to other problems, to hopes for economic gains, to tourism-like trips, to seeking new relationships, to currying favors with temple priests or political figures, to spiritual experiences. The motives of participants were far too complex to deal with here and are less important for understanding how and why pilgrimage centers emerged. Obviously, as with feasts, some of the motives for organizing events could co-occur and overlap, although I think that usually there was a dominant motive, and thus it should be possible to identify more or less distinguishable types of pilgrimages. In addition, over time some types might evolve into other types, especially given successes.

The main assumption of archaeologists seems to have been that given significant success in any of these types, some pilgrimage centers could be transformed into major political and economic centers with large populations, massive architecture, and highly stratified societies, as seems to have been the case in some historical instances such as Mecca, Compostela, and Lourdes (Sallnow 1987:8; Werbner 1977:xxiv; Eickelman 1977:7). Takeovers of successful or popular pilgrimage sites by secular political powers for their own political and economic gains have also been suggested, although the pilgrimage practices were maintained to ensure streams of revenue (Vreeland 1991:232, 240). Historic examples include medieval pilgrimage shrines in

Europe that were fortified, had their own knights, and seignorial rights over villages (232). The same kinds of developments occurred at the most successful Classical Greek shrines like Eleusis and Delphi, largely taken over by political powers and turned into revenue-generating enterprises (Jacob 1945:66).

The transformation of any of the above pilgrimage types of local pilgrimage shrines into major ritual or political centers appears to have been a possible development in the past; however, details of the dynamics have been seldom addressed. The alternative pathway for major ritual-political centers to have emerged (i.e., from a secret society basis) seems to me a much more likely scenario since secret societies were, above all, about promoting power for their members. However, in many cases, the structure of successful regional pilgrimages had similar characteristics to secret societies: regional organizations, voluntary participation, hierarchies with exclusive access to shrine interiors and/or claims to supernatural knowledge, income generation, public displays, claims to benefit people through supernatural connections, induction of ecstatic experiences, multiple competing organizations, and the payment of fees.

Should convocations of secret society members at established ritual sites be considered as a type of power-based "pilgrimage," or something distinct? I tend to think of regional secret society rituals as distinct from pilgrimages, although there may certainly be ambiguous cases. If we want to follow this distinction, what are some of the key differences between secret societies and pilgrimage organizations?

Perhaps the most important difference is that members of the main power-oriented secret societies were always wealthy and powerful individuals, whereas most pilgrimages depended largely on voluntary popular participation by non-elites. In addition, entry to successful secret societies was by costly formal initiations which were progressively graded in esoteric knowledge and expense. Pilgrimages did not seem to have any such provisions, or at most they were minimal. Moreover, secret societies demanded long-lasting commitments from members, whereas pilgrims had no such commitments, although founders of shrines and leaders of major pilgrimage events ("brotherhoods," *cofradías*, *marabout* guardians, tribal leaders) clearly had some dedication to such organizations and they collected fees from participants.

Neither human sacrifice, the use of terror, nor extreme enforcement such as the killing of trespassers appears to have been a prominent feature of any ethnographic pilgrimage accounts, although Sallnow (1987:138–41; 1991:299) did report occasional deaths and dismemberments in Andean ritual battles at pilgrimages, and mummified children's remains have been recovered archaeologically from high points in the Andes, presumably representing offerings during some kind of ritual or "pilgrimage" to mountains. Nevertheless, such instances were very rare and there was no account of any cannibalism, whereas

sacrifices and cannibalism seem to have been frequent features of many secret societies – most likely symptomatic of the greater concern by secret society members for displaying raw power and their use of terror. Their goal was to terrorize non-initiates and lower ranking members and to extort wealth and ensure acquiescence. Thus, masks and terrorizing enforcement cadres were common in secret societies but not in pilgrimages. In contrast, the goal of most pilgrimage organizers was to attract as many people as possible so that offerings would be made. Therefore, rather than terrorizing people, efforts were made to entice them to attend with positive prospects of help in one form or another. Most pilgrimages were thus driven by popular participation rather than by exclusive cadres of wealthy elites.

Secret societies generally involved power hierarchies and promoted socio-economic distinctions. Pilgrimages often downplayed such distinctions, at least in their ideology and in some contexts, and were supposed to cross-cut classes and socioeconomic levels. Thus, despite the elite control of *marabout* sites and the central role of political leaders, there was supposed to be a common identity across classes and the precincts were open to all (McCorriston 2011:42,64,158,224; see also Sallnow 1987:2–3 for the Andes), although lavish displays of success or spiritual power might occur.

Pilgrimage centers might sequester holy images or items in small inaccessible rooms; however, they did not generally appear to create other secret or remote facilities for their most important rituals. Generally, the goal of the pilgrim was to enter at least the sacred precincts. In contrast, for many of their rituals, secret societies tended to use caves or semi-subterranean structures or structures from which non-members were strictly excluded. Such differences may be identifiable in architectural characteristics as in the case of Chavín.

Prestige items may not have been very prominent in any but the most successful pilgrimage shrines, although some pilgrimages did feature elaborate costumes and displays (e.g., at Mecca, St. Peter's, and Compostela). In contrast, expensive exotica would be expected features of most power-oriented secret societies. There may be other ways of distinguishing pilgrimage organizations from secret societies, but this is a topic for more detailed future investigation. Archaeologists almost never discuss pilgrimages prior to the emergence of ritual centers with elaborate architecture. Small shrines in villages such as occur in non-megalithic Neolithic contexts are simply viewed as village shrines rather than pilgrimage destinations.

### *Amphictyonies*

Suggestions have been made that some of the shrines and ritual materials in the Near Eastern PPN may have corresponded to the Greek *amphictyonies* (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen 2008; Goring-Morris et al. 2009). The

earliest form of these organizations pre-dates the formation of the Greek polis, thus appearing as some sort of confederation or league of pre-state polities. Later, these organizations became religious institutions that supported temples and games. Little more is known about *amphictyonies* or why they were created, how they functioned, or how they were underwritten. Simply stating that ritual centers were *amphictyony* ritual organizations does not advance our understanding of why these practices were adopted, how they functioned, or what role they played in cultural developments.

## CONCLUSIONS

In reviewing the previous chapters, it can be concluded that secret societies were types of institutionalized religious organizations that first appeared among complex hunter/gatherer societies with abundant resources. They probably occurred in the European Upper Paleolithic, and possibly earlier. Secret societies make most sense as surplus-based strategies created by ambitious aggrandizers to concentrate resources and power in their own hands, although defensive secret societies sometimes emerged to protect members from more powerful predatory secret societies. Secret societies were widespread in transegalitarian cultures, although they were not universal and cannot be viewed as a defining or universal characteristic of any evolutionary trajectory at this time. They also occurred in a range of chiefdom societies and, in some cases, continued to exist in more complex state societies. They were one possible, but very effective, way for ambitious individuals to transcend kinship and local constraints on power and resources. Other possibilities included extended kinship (clan) organizations, age grades, military alliances or confederacies, trade associations, work associations, various types of pilgrimage organizations, and probably other sodality types.

Given the frequent occurrence of secret societies in ethnographic transegalitarian and chiefdom societies, it can be expected that they are well represented in the archaeological record. Yet, aside from the identification of kivas in the American Southwest and a few dance/sweat houses in California, prehistorians have almost entirely ignored the existence of secret societies in the archaeological record. I suggest that they are particularly well represented by “communal structures” and by caves used for ritual purposes.

Secret societies generally created regional networks, involved the most powerful individuals in a number of communities, and were closely tied to the exercise of political power. Thus, they seem to have been primed to play central roles in the development of more complex political and religious organizations such as those that characterize chiefdoms and early states. In essence, it should have been easy for the most successful regional secret

societies to become Super Secret Society Regional Polities, and then become state religions or form state political organizations.

I suggest that this explains the otherwise puzzling emphasis in early villages and subsequent states on religious architecture and the key roles of religious personnel in the administrative apparatus of early states. Viewing political complexity as emerging from secret society origins may also explain why the heads of states so often resorted to the use of terror and lavish impressive ritual displays of power to rule their domains. These were the main tactics used by most successful secret societies. Thus, secret societies may constitute the missing link in understanding why religion played such a prominent role in the development of more complex polities, including early states.

With the establishment of secret society organizations came the first commandments (against trespass and dishonoring the society), the first organized ritual system outside kinship groups with a corporate existence transcending individual lives, the first priest-like roles, and the first institutionalized links to power. In essence, I want to argue that secret societies created the foundations from which the world religions of the past three millennia emerged. The material remains of secret societies have almost certainly already been excavated by archaeologists in many parts of the world, but have not generally been recognized as such. Secret societies need to be looked at in new ways. They merit far more attention than archaeologists have thus far accorded them.

Do the ecstatic experiences that were such an integral part of most secret society initiations provide any valid insights into ultimate realities? Perhaps not in terms of the specific content of visions or revelations, but perhaps simply in terms of human abilities to perceive other experiences – other dimensions – that exist beyond those that our five senses normally apprehend.



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# INDEX

- acceptance of ideological claims, 20, 133, 343, 351, 352, 370
- acquiescence, *see* acceptance
- aggrandizers and their strategies, 13, 16, 18, 318, 346, 371
- psychology of, 17
- alternative types of organizations, 6, 147, 194, 200, 201, 349, 371
- animal transformations, 84, 97, 104, 105, 116, 129, 132, 155, 164, 166, 184, 249, 251, 260, 261, 262, 264, 267, 268, 279, 328, 331, 341, 347
- arrows, arrowheads, *see* projectiles
- art styles of secret societies, *see* interaction spheres
- astronomy in secret societies, 83, 90, 93, 94, 131, 155, 292, 342
- prehistoric examples, 295, 297, 303, 321, 322, 325, 327, 334
- beliefs, variability in, 18, 20, 58, 104, 105, 129, 221, 249, 267, 344, 351, 352
- as explanations, *see* ideology
- berserkers, 306
- bone tubes for sucking, 33, 61, 105, 184
- bucrania, 153, 167, 168, 172, 243f9.8, 276, 307, 308, 313
- bullroarers, *see* musical instruments
- burdens of ritual roles, 128, 129
- calendar, *see* astronomy
- cannibalism, *see* sacrifice, human
- caves, 41, 56, 65, 66, 67, 68, 86, 106, 108, 110, 129, 131, 133, 136, 137, 138, 142, 149, 170, 230, 293, 342
- archaeological examples, 288, 289, 294, 302, 303, 304, 306, 320, 323, 325
- Charivari, 306
- communitarian views, *see* structural-functionalism
- competition within and between secret societies, 35, 126, 136, 172, 202, 210, 212, 234, 257, 266, 295, 317, 356, 357, 359, 360
- contravention of social norms, 46, 83, 93, 129, 195, 215, 238, 242, 251, 260, 338, 344
- dangers of supernatural, 15, 19, 36, 46, 49, 52, 58, 80, 83, 90, 92, 93, 94, 96, 101, 103, 104, 129, 133, 136, 146, 148, 155, 156, 158, 165, 166, 188, 199, 203, 214, 218, 219, 220, 222, 237, 248, 288, 316, 321, 341, 342
- deaths in initiations, 39, 56, 253, 266, 267, 269
- derivative secret societies, 11, 13, 124, 250, 257, 337, 347
- dolmens, *see* megaliths
- doubters, *see* beliefs, variability
- extortion, 45, 147, 151, 154, 196, 212, 250, 258, 346, 370
- flutes, *see* musical instruments
- functionalism, *see* structural-functionalism
- genital mutilation, 266, 267
- graffiti art, 299
- Greek mystery cults, 246, 280, 305, 343, 362, 363, 369
- ideology as explanation, 2, 6, 14, 19, 21, 104, 123, 127, 128, 146, 315, 322, 334, 352
- interaction spheres, 5, 41, 44, 69, 90, 115, 138, 144, 235, 290, 298, 325, 348
- Keatley Creek site, 4, 62, 324
- kinship limitations, 5, 43, 68, 138, 233, 303, 371

- megaliths, 205, 214, 217, 222, 227, 231, 233, 237, 254, 272  
     prehistoric, 303, 309  
 menhirs, *see* megaliths  
 mourning rituals, 77, 78, 90, 101, 105, 107, 112  
 mummers, 306  
 musical instruments, 33, 40, 59, 81, 85, 105, 106, 107, 133, 134, 167, 168, 188, 199, 204, 219, 223, 224, 243, 253, 269, 270  
     prehistoric, 289, 297, 312, 323, 326  
 mythical animals, 42, 70, 93, 150, 171, 187, 291, 313, 334  
  
 plastered human skulls, 204, 205, 227, 231, 255, 275, 293, 312  
 poisoning, 90, 104, 111, 167, 180, 184, 188, 251, 257, 360  
 poles, sacred, *see* staffs and poles  
 political ecology, 16  
 polygyny, 212, 213, 275  
 projectiles, projectile points used in rituals, 53, 79, 102, 103, 106, 134, 137, 149, 164, 167, 168, 185, 204, 224, 229, 243, 289  
 purchase of rituals, 35, 61, 90, 91, 95, 113, 116, 145, 152, 153, 154, 157, 161, 164, 171, 174, 200, 202, 210, 211, 212, 215, 216, 249, 290, 348  
  
 quartz crystal, 34, 40, 46, 54, 55, 62, 106, 134, 204, 224, 271, 289, 290  
  
 rivalry, *see* competition  
  
 sacrifice, human, 2, 21, 39, 47, 49, 52, 53, 57, 59, 67, 85, 105, 196, 204, 211, 217, 218, 221, 222, 243, 248, 251, 252, 253, 255, 258, 259, 260, 261, 263, 264, 265, 267, 268, 269, 271, 272, 275, 279, 280, 291, 320, 337, 339, 344, 345, 350, 369  
     prehistoric, 297, 303, 304, 305, 307, 308, 309, 315, 316, 317, 325, 326, 328, 331, 333, 334  
 scarification, 41, 70, 81, 102, 115, 252, 266, 267, 271, 361  
 sculptures, *see* stone sculptures  
 shaking tents, 185  
 social solidarity, *see* structural-functionalism  
 spears, spearpoints, *see* projectiles  
 staffs and poles, 33, 61, 63, 79f3.2, 86, 106, 107, 108, 111, 134, 167, 168, 169, 185, 187, 195, 227  
 stone sculptures, 134, 135f4.2, 214, 222, 227, 309, 311, 312  
 stone shrines and circles, 108, 137, 169, 217, 222, 227, 232, 333  
 stones, special or sacred, 62, 134, 201, 203, 211, 215, 216, 222, 229  
 structural-functionalism, 14, 17, 139, 312, 317, 332, 334, 354  
 supernatural competitions, 101, 104, 114, 148, 164, 165, 175  
 surplus, 14, 25, 45, 80, 82, 286, 345, 350, 362, 371  
     prehistoric, 295, 306, 315, 318, 324, 327  
  
 terror tactics, 2, 12, 21, 25, 35, 39, 43, 47, 48, 52, 56, 84, 89, 96, 102, 196, 202, 203, 210, 212, 218, 219, 220, 249, 251, 256, 262, 265, 267, 331, 337, 343, 344, 345, 360, 362, 369, 372  
     prehistoric, 311  
 tortoise shells in rituals, 271, 307  
 tribal initiations (compared with secret societies), 8, 77, 81, 193, 199, 200  
 tusked boars, 212, 235  
  
 vision quests, 65, 84, 108, 154, 176  
     prehistoric, 297  
  
 werewolves, 306  
 whistles, *see* musical instruments

*The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* is the first book in nearly a century to deal with traditional secret societies from a comparative perspective and the first from an archaeological viewpoint. Providing a clear definition, as well as the material signatures, of ethnographic secret societies, Brian Hayden demonstrates how they worked, what motivated their organizers, and what tactics they used to obtain what they wanted. He shows that far from working for the welfare of their communities, traditional secret societies emerged as predatory organizations operated for the benefit of their own members. Moreover, and contrary to the prevailing ideas that prehistoric rituals were used to integrate communities, Hayden demonstrates how traditional secret societies created divisiveness and inequalities. They were one of the key tools for increasing political control leading to chiefdoms, states, and world religions. Hayden's conclusions will be eye-opening, not only for archaeologists, but also for anthropologists, political scientists, and scholars of religion.

**Brian Hayden** is a Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and Professor Emeritus at Simon Fraser University. In addition to excavating sites on three continents, he has conducted ethnoarchaeological research in Australia, British Columbia, Guatemala, Mexico, Polynesia, and Southeast Asia. These studies have resulted in new models of domestication, feasting, social inequalities, and now ritual and religion. Hayden has been recognized for this pioneering work as a member of the Royal Society of Canada. His other works include: *The Power of Feasts* (Cambridge, 2014), *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion* (2003), and *Archaeology: The Science of Once and Future Things* (1997).

Cover image: A large stone mask without provenience, but similar in style and material to stone masks dated to the PPNB. (Collection of Judy and Michael Steinhardt, New York Exhibited at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner).

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